

Riches, John K. *A Century of New Testament Study*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993. x + 246 pp. Paper, \$17.00.

John Riches is Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism and head of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Glasgow. His book offers a critical analysis of the work done in NT studies in the last century, arguing that developments in the discipline have corresponded to cultural shifts which had their roots in major political and economic changes in society (233). He seeks to understand the reasons for the shift away from the historical approaches which, until recently, dominated the discipline, in favor of new approaches to the text (ix, 240).

His work is divided into three sections. He begins with a historical survey of the direction of NT studies to the end of the nineteenth century, followed by developments from Johannes Weiss in 1892 to Rudolf Bultmann. This is the most interesting part of the book, revealing the cultural and historical factors which correlated with the studies of that period. The chapter, "Some Concluding Reflections" (233-235), gives a concise summary of major developments.

The second part focuses on the work of Bultmann himself. Riches is unapologetic that the figure of Bultmann "dominates the book," for the latter "dominated the discipline in this century by achieving a unique synthesis of theological and historical interpretation of the New Testament" (viii). The major weakness of Bultmann's interpretation, according to Riches, was his existentialism, which focused exclusively on the self-understanding of the individual and so failed to adequately account for social and political factors in religious belief (87-88).

The third section surveys the work done since Bultmann. It is presented in five areas: Jesus studies, Pauline studies, Markan studies, Johannine studies, and NT Theology. Riches reveals how the weaknesses of one scholar provides fodder for the work of others, but without ever achieving any assured results or consensus. He criticizes every major scholar for failing to answer the pressing questions in a balanced way. Each has his or her own agenda that influences the results. Riches concludes that in maintaining the important synthesis between history and theology, "there has been no notable successor to Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*" (204). Not only that, but none of the proposals made for the future of NT theology suggest that it might be possible to revive Bultmann's synthesis (229). Rather, all but Hans Urs von Balthasar have abandoned the attempt to produce a biblical theology that is both historical and 'actualizing' (229).

While Riches yearns for a new synthesis between historical and theological studies of the NT, he is pessimistic about the likelihood of achieving it. He points out that to date there has been no consensus achieved in either the theology or the historiography of the NT. He asks, "Is the discipline as a whole able to resolve such debates within its present frame of reference?" and answers his own question: "If not, it might well seem that it will have to change that frame" (162). Speaking of Markan studies, he notes that the present "considerable diversity" is "unlikely to be resolved in the immediate future" (169). In fact, he adds, since "a comprehensive reconstruction of the history of

the tradition behind Mark is impossible, . . . to make such a reconstruction the basis of any account of Mark's theology is to condemn the discipline to confusion" (169-170). He says something very similar regarding the possibility of constructing a NT theology in general. With regard to Krister Stendahl's program for moving from the historical to hermeneutical reflection on the theological meaning, he writes, "Most obviously, it is a programme that cannot easily, if at all, move beyond the first stage. The work of the descriptive historian is never done, and the biblical theologian who embarks on the task of translating such original meanings into some meaning for today is chronically in danger of being false-footed by subsequent developments in New Testament historiography" (204).

Riches sees in today's pluralistic cultures and global society an increasing avoidance by scholarship of any objectification of faith that may lead to confessionalism and the superior culturalism manifested in the past by the liberal tradition, especially in Germany and England before World War II. He does not deny the validity of a confessional tradition, but he hopes that they will "see the future of that confession as lying in a greater openness to other traditions and religions" (231).

The book is a valuable contribution to the discipline, but there are several areas in which it could be improved. First, it is difficult to read, due in large part to the small, crowded type without any subheads or divisions to rest the eye or to signal changes in the flow of thought within the long chapters. This, combined with the technical nature of the language and the extended, detailed critical argumentation, may account for the very significant increase in editorial errors—over twenty—in the last hundred pages: the proofreader also apparently became wearied with the text.

Second, it is often difficult to discern where Riches is reflecting the ideas of his source as opposed to his own ideas. Sometimes he writes as though an idea is his own, but then the reader will find a page credit showing that the idea is taken from his source. Where there is no page credit given, there is frequently no clear basis for distinguishing whose idea is being represented.

Third, two features of Riches writing were done to excess and should have been given some editorial attention. One is his proclivity to use the expression, "that is to say," which is used far more than necessary. The other is his obsession with using the feminine gender throughout for all generic personal pronouns. I found "he/she" and "him/her" used in only one place, the masculine alone never. It may not be important, but it is distracting to the average reader because it is frequently unrepresentative of the context. A balanced approach would be better.

A Century of New Testament Study is challenging reading, but will reward the diligent, and is recommended for all those with an interest in the discipline of NT studies.

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