

Review Article

RICHARD A BURRIDGE

Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics

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Of the writing of books on New Testament ethics, there is clearly no end. Each decade tends to throw up a magnum opus: Wolfgang Schrage's *The Ethics of the New Testament* in the 1980s and Richard Hays' *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* in the 1990s. Time will tell, but Richard Burrige's *Imitating Jesus* could turn out to be the most significant work on New Testament ethics in the present decade.

Burrige begins by taking issue with many who have written before him. His complaint is threefold. First, he alleges that many surveys of New Testament ethics are simply that – surveys. They fail to grapple with how they might be applied in the contemporary world. Second, he says that most New Testament ethicists concentrate on the final forms of the Gospels to the detriment of any serious consideration of Jesus. Third, he thinks their analysis of the ethical teaching in the Gospels tends to be abstracted from what Jesus did. Burrige picks up a theme from his earlier writings, his comparative study of other ancient 'lives', which showed that such biographies contain teachings in a narrative account, 'often for the purposes of mimesis, imitation of a good example to follow, or a bad one to avoid' (31). This is an important point. Jesus' actions throw light on his words and vice-versa; they provide help, for example in understanding how literally we should interpret some of his more radical or hyperbolic sayings.

Burrige acknowledges that there are problems in reconstructing the historical Jesus, and that Mark, Matthew, Luke and John each has his own distinctive theological and ecclesiastical concerns which shape their portrayals of Jesus. He documents these in a thorough if rather painstaking way in later chapters. But first he sets out a brief outline of Jesus' life, gleaned from the parts of the Gospels he thinks most historically trustworthy, in chapter 2. Significantly, this is entitled 'Jesus: Great Moral Teacher or Friend of Sinners?'. Burrige identifies two paradoxical characteristics of Jesus about which he feels we can be sure. On the one hand, the ethic Jesus taught was extremely rigorous and demanding. 'In his appeal for the eschatological restoration of the people of God, Jesus intensified the demands of the law with his rigorous ethic of renunciation and self-denial in all the major human ethical experiences, such as money, sex, power, violence and so forth' (61). On the other hand, Jesus offered a welcome to and shared meals with notorious sinners. The excerpt on p.61 continues: at the same time, his emphasis 'on love and forgiveness opened the community to the very people who had difficulties in these areas.'

Burrige is struck by the fact that, unlike John the Baptist, Jesus seems content to accept sinners as they are and does not give concrete instructions about how these dubious followers are to demonstrate repentance. He notes that Jesus does not demand anything of Zacchaeus; the idea to give half his possessions to the

poor and reimburse anyone he had defrauded fourfold was Zacchaeus', not Jesus'. But this surely underestimates the power of Jesus to provoke personal change simply because of the sort of person he was, without any need for words. The sinful woman in Luke 7.36-40 is another example of a person who shows evidence of a changed life, evident in the love she exhibits towards Jesus, which was brought about by the forgiveness and acceptance she had received from him.

Burridge notes how there is a popular caricature of St Paul, exemplified by a memorable sketch from Peter Cook and Dudley Moore ('Dear Ephiscans, stop enjoying yourselves...'), that his ethics are fundamentally cast in a negative mode and therefore at odds with Jesus. But while it is true that Paul cites approvingly the saying 'bad company ruins good morals' (1 Cor.15.33), Burridge believes that he, like Jesus, combines a demanding ethic with a sympathetic understanding of where people are at. There are places where Paul's teaching is clear-cut (e.g. 1 Cor.6) and others where he is surprisingly ready to tolerate diversity and acceptance of varied viewpoints (e.g. Rom.14-15). Burridge agrees with James Dunn in regarding Paul as a deeply caring pastor, sensitively blending 'authoritative tradition, personal opinion, and pragmatic counsel which respects real-life situations' (130). In addition, though Paul cites relatively few sayings or incidents from Jesus' life, his central ethic of self-giving humility is clearly grounded in the example of Jesus (e.g. Phil.2.1-11).

The contemporary situation to which Burridge repeatedly applies New Testament teaching, and which he explores in depth in his final chapter, is the recent history of South Africa. He has made several visits to that country, partly through the institutional links of King's College London (where he is Dean), and thereby built up a specialist knowledge and expertise. He demonstrates how appeal to the Bible *per se* failed to settle the arguments about apartheid. There is an extraordinary pattern by which the same story of exodus from slavery to freedom in the promised land inspired both Afrikaners and black Africans. In the first version, the Afrikaners were the victims of oppression (in Europe, or by the British in the Cape) and were set free by God; in the second, they are the oppressors of others, the native peoples of South Africa.

Burridge considers four typical approaches taken by biblical ethicists: (i) obeying rules and prescriptive commands; (ii) looking for principles and universal values; (iii) following examples and paradigms; and (iv) embracing an overall symbolic world-view, grounded in biblical themes like creation, fall, redemption and eschatology. He claims that all four of these were used on both sides in the South African debate; and because we now accept that one side was right and the other wrong in that debate, these approaches are largely discredited, or at least severely relativised. Burridge takes from the earlier part of the book the message that imitating Jesus in an inclusive community is the central ethical theme of the New Testament, its hermeneutical key, and 'this was the one thing that pro-apartheid theology did NOT do' (capitals his: 409). No imitation of Jesus could justify such violence and oppression. Moreover, if the proponents of such theology had listened to the voices of protest and opened up the interpretative community to those who were suffering under it, they could never have arrived at the doctrine of separate development.

This may be true, but I believe Burridge goes too far when he claims that this fifth 'genre-based' approach transcends the others: 'It is...the overall context within

which the other four are all employed, the umbrella which needs to protect the community from abusive or morally repugnant readings' (390). He has failed to do justice to the fourth approach, that of setting real-life situations in the light of an overall biblical world-view (the use of which in any case he fails to establish as equally problematic with the earlier three in relation to South Africa). Jesus the friend of sinners is a crucially important theme, but it makes sense within the overall story of God's dealings with humanity, not the other way round.

Richard Burrige has made a very important contribution to New Testament ethics, and I enjoyed the synopsis of the book that he presented at Greenbelt and the engaging way he responded to questioners. However, in his methodological proposals I am not convinced that he is as coherent or as sure-footed as Richard Hays, with whom he frequently disagrees. Burrige takes issue with Hays – as I do – over the latter's downgrading of love, but he fails to note that one of Hays' three focal images, the cross, is a specific embodiment of love. Finally, though, I have a criticism which applies to both Burrige and Hays. Each concentrates on Paul and the Gospel-writers, and has almost nothing to say about other New Testament books such as Hebrews, Peter and James – all of which contain plenty of interesting ethical material. Surely books on New Testament ethics with such ambitious aims ought to include them too?

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