
BOOK REVIEW

Richard A. BurrIDGE, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). xxi + 490 pp. US\$35.00 / £19.99 (hb), ISBN 978-0-8028-4458-3.

In an extension of his influential work on the literary genre of the Gospels as ancient biographies Richard BurrIDGE here turns to the implications of this thesis for the contemporary moral *application* of the New Testament – specifically, the four Gospels and the Pauline literature. Previous studies of the New Testament and ethics, which BurrIDGE surveys in typically comprehensive detail, are charged with paying scant attention to the deeds and shape of Jesus' life. In contrast to Richard Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), BurrIDGE therefore prioritizes Jesus, not Paul. When Jesus' deeds are placed alongside his teaching the necessarily mimetic shape of the Christian life becomes clear. Specifically for BurrIDGE, disciples of Jesus are to imitate their master by forming communities of inclusion.

With a variety of contemporary ecclesial disputes in the background – such as the homosexuality debate – the question running throughout this book is: 'What is a "biblical" ethic?' The answer, BurrIDGE repeatedly contends, is to be found by attending to the biographical genre of the Gospels. An appropriate grasp of the literary form of the central New Testament writings funds the corresponding moral response – imitation. As ancient biographies the Gospels are not to be read as ethical manuals or treatises but as accounts which reveal their subject's character by narrating Jesus' words *and* deeds, 'all with the express aim of *mimesis* – imitation. Therefore the ethical approach which we are advocating is embedded within the actual genre of the texts themselves and derived from there, not imposed from outside the text' (p. 390). It is by attention to what Jesus does that readers can learn much about what is expected from them in their lives of discipleship. BurrIDGE's answer to the question, 'What Would Jesus Do?' (which he does not patronisingly cast aside) is to remind us that the implicit focus in this question is on what Jesus *did*, not just on what he *said*. Followers of Jesus are called to imitate Jesus' 'own merciful and loving acceptance of everyone, including or especially those whom some consider[ed] to be "sinners"' (p. 78). It should be said that BurrIDGE is too astute a reader of the Gospels to fail to point out the tension between seeking to be holy as God is holy (hence the New Testament's 'strenuous commands') and seeking to practise inclusive mercy in imitation of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Taking on the role of an archaeologist, BurrIDGE structures his book by moving up through the chronological levels of the New Testament. Beginning

with the historical Jesus-event Burridge therefore resolves to 'trace the story forward through the gospels and letters ... right through to the modern level of the concrete surface' provided by South Africa (p. 21). At the earliest level the historical Jesus keeps our attention trained on one who was radically inclusive in calling sinners into his company, who intensified the law in a number of areas, and whose teaching called for *responsiveness* to the Kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching cannot therefore be isolated from the in-breaking of the reign and rule of God. Nor, in a rebuttal of Richard Hays that reappears throughout the book, is the love Jesus teaches vapid and open to cheap co-option. The love Jesus exhorts his disciples to embody is nothing less than responsiveness to 'the eschatological sovereignty of God' (p. 55).

Space precludes me from paying justice to Burridge's chapters on Paul and the Synoptic Gospels in which he follows a broadly similar pattern of charting what the texts have to say about Christology, eschatology, love and the law, certain specific ethical issues, and finally imitation of Christ. These chapters are impressively wide-ranging, locate the Christological centre of gravity in the individual writings, and yet reveal the distinctive strains of each text. Burridge's appeal that we must attend to Jesus' deeds pays especial dividends in his reading of the Gospel of John, where he responds convincingly to accusations that the Fourth Gospel is ethically barren or uninterested in engaging with outsiders. Those who throw this charge in the direction of the Fourth Gospel are invited to look again and see the ethical *implications* of the divine love made flesh. The narration of Jesus as one who sought outsiders such as the Samaritan woman and who loved the world to the point of the cross has a determined mimetic purpose, namely that we as readers 'should follow Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love within a mixed community of others who are also responding to his call and reaching out to his world' (p. 346).

Many readers may well find the final chapter of the book the most exciting (if sobering). Here Burridge takes the New Testament into the recent history of South Africa where apartheid was given strong biblical justification. Examining four common approaches to appropriating the Bible for contemporary ethical behaviour (based respectively on rules; principles; examples and paradigms; and the overall worldview of the text), Burridge shows how each of these approaches could be appealed to by pro- and anti-apartheid sides in their attempts to show that they were being 'biblical'. Charting a fifth way, Burridge looks to the importance of reading the Bible in an inclusive community open to outsiders. Fellowships open to the voice of outsiders will be protected from repeating the sinful reading practices evidenced by South African churches (and universities) during the apartheid era. Such contextual Bible reading that listened to the protests of 'ordinary' readers was one practice precisely not carried out by pro-apartheid theology which could have protected the country from inhumane readings. The emphasis on contextual reading, recently championed by those like Gerald West, is a realization that 'to be truly biblical is to be inclusive in any community which wants to follow and imitate Jesus' (p. 409).

Richard Burridge begins his book by saying that he wants to provide more than a mere survey of the various ethical perspectives of the New Testament authors. Does he succeed? Some readers may be frustrated by the extent to

which he dwells on the 'theology', and not just the 'ethics', of his particular writers. This would be a misplaced frustration, albeit one that Burridge could do more to discourage. Burridge rightly argues that the teaching of Jesus is embedded in what he does and that the responsiveness of the Christian life is about more than following isolated precepts: 'ethics and theology are integrated and behaviour is a consequence of a right relationship with God' (p. 100). By turning to a host of theologians from Barth to Hauerwas, Burridge could have more clearly asserted that the presumed distinction (articulated by our imaginary disgruntled reader) between theology and ethics needs to be challenged continually. The relatively minor role given over to *theological* voices in this book prevent some connections being made explicit that would have only bolstered Burridge's argument, and saved him from the occasional inconsistency (e.g. the apparent implication on p. 98 that Paul's letters can be divided into 'doctrine' and 'ethics'). Moreover, a sustained attention to ecclesiology (perhaps in company with Rowan Williams's writings) would have helped develop the point that one cannot have a community of inclusion without also knowing how and when it is right to exclude.

The workings of this book display the habits of a meticulous New Testament scholar shaped by modern norms of reading the Bible. Hence Burridge maintains an excessively sharp distinction between meanings 'then' and meanings 'now', evinced in his unwillingness (?) to draw contemporary theological and ethical voices into the conversation at an earlier stage. Theological voices make an appearance only after the textual work has been done; they are not part of the process of understanding the text. I certainly want to travel with Burridge when he moves forwards and not backwards through the texts but, unlike him, I am not so vexed by the historical 'gap' between the time of the texts' production and their reading now. There is a danger that prioritizing talk of the distance between 'then' and 'now' saps our interpretive energies and allows us to forget that the church (in all its manifest imperfections) mediates Scripture and its narrative(s) through time. Burridge's determined attention to New Testament scholarship (until the very last chapter) risks implying that the New Testament had not been read before the modern period. Attention to the church as a reader of Scripture through time reinforces that the decisive gap between the New Testament and us is one of performance (as John Howard Yoder said – a voice strangely absent from this book). For engaged readings of the New Testament, for which Burridge's final chapter is very suggestive, we need to think of models outside the standard linear projection and so avoid seeing *as determinative* distinctions between meanings 'then' and 'now'. We need, in other words, to prevent our well-guarded disciplinary boundaries from determining our reading of the Bible as Scripture. In a book seeking to reap the contemporary riches of the New Testament, attention to the triune God's action and the church's long history of reading the text should surely play a more determinative role. These are hermeneutical concerns written, I hope, in sympathy with Burridge's aims. In the substance of this book there is much that will stimulate readers into further thought and action.

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