

A Discussion: Richard Burridge's Jesus

Imitating Jesus: reading the Eternal Word

For the six years I was at Hartford Seminary (which is one-third Muslim), I had the enjoyable challenge of teaching Christian doctrine to Muslims. I have lost count of the number of conversations I have with Muslims who invite me to compare the Bible and the Qur'an and admit that the Qur'an looks much more like the Word of God than the Bible. In every case, I would push back and insist that they are not comparing like with like. For Christians, the primary Word of God is the Eternal Word – the Word made flesh in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, I would explain the right way to compare the Qur'an is not with the Bible but with the Eternal Word made flesh.¹ The incarnation is the Christian equivalent of the Qur'an. And perhaps it is better to see the Bible as closer to the Hadith. At this point, the same question is asked: 'but how is it possible to read a life?'

Richard Burridge has provided the answer. However, before we get to this answer, let us frame out the Christian claim about the location of the definitive Word of God rather more. The Eternal Word is identical with the 'Son' within the Trinity. To oversimplify, and opt for a particular account of, the incarnation, Christians claim that the Eternal Word completely interpenetrates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the primary Word, which means that ultimately if you want to know what God is like then you need to read a life. This means that technically we are not people of a book, for the primary Word of God is a life.

Almost everything about the past comes through a text (it is only relatively recently that images – photographs and video – have become available). So given the incarnation is a past event, Christians believe that there is a Written Word which is important. These are the scriptures. However, the precise

¹ The other advantage of this comparison is that it helps Muslims to see why the doctrine of the Trinity is necessary for Christians. Muslims believe that the Qur'an as the Word of God must be eternal and have pre-existed the creation. They do this for sound theological reasons: God's Word would not simply start but must have always been with God even in eternity past. If the Eternal Word made flesh is the Christian equivalent of the Qur'an, then one can start to understand why pre-existence of the Son became so important in Christian doctrine. And one can further understand that Christians did not want the Word of God sitting in eternity past separate from the Creator, so the doctrine of the Trinity emerged to safeguard our monotheistic commitments.

relationship between the Written Word and the Eternal Word is a matter of considerable debate.

In this response to *Imitating Jesus*, I will form two arguments. First, with *Imitating Jesus*, the debate about the relationship between the Eternal Word and the Written Word has been changed forever. The second is that the one person who doesn't quite see the significance of the argument is the author of *Imitating Jesus*. I shall now unpack these two arguments.

The relationship of the Eternal Word to the Written Word in *Imitating Jesus*

The argument of *Imitating Jesus* is elegant in its simplicity. It is a christological argument. First, Burridge explains that the gospels are properly understood as 'biography' or 'ancient lives' (pp. 24–31). Second, the purpose of the gospel is to invite us to imitate the 'words and deeds' of Jesus of Nazareth. Third, the gospels celebrate different aspects of the character, discourse and actions of Jesus, but all exhort 'imitation'. Fourth, the 'words' of Jesus often exhort us to live transformed lives, while the deeds of Jesus witness to a full inclusion of all those who struggle with those exhortations. Fifth, the rest of the New Testament (certainly Paul's epistles) describes a community which affirms both poles of the task of 'imitating Jesus'. Sixth, we are called both to witness to transformed lives and include in the conversation all those who struggle with that work of transformation. Seventh, keeping the community broad is also a way of making sure that the dominant narrative is really committed to the work of faithful transformation.

How exactly does this argument shape the theological conversation about the relationship between the Eternal Word and the Written Word? It does so in several ways. The history of Christian ethics has tended to play down the Eternal Word and focus on the Written Word. For those in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, the role of Jesus was primarily soteriological. The life was played down and the focus was almost entirely on the atonement. The death of Jesus was important for soteriological reasons and the life was a necessary prelude to the death. For those in the Catholic traditions, Aristotelian philosophy would supplement the text of scripture and the disclosure of the Eternal Word was clearly secondary. In both cases, the Bible was important, but Jesus was less so. One reason for this is that the tradition was not entirely clear how to 'read a life'. In addition, the Bible was easier – in the text there is a wealth of ethical instruction and exhortation. Thus the Written Word was the basis for ethical discussion and the Eternal Word was neglected.

Richard Burridge has demonstrated that this relegation of Jesus is gravely misguided. In fact, the opposite is true. To read the New Testament properly

one must see the centrality of Jesus. And the whole concept of *bios* (ancient biography) could be interpreted as the way in which one can 'read the Eternal Word' disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

In other words, for Burridge, the intent of the authors in the New Testament (it is lovely to have the concept of authorial intent back in the frame) was to create a community that imitated both the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Once Jesus was no longer with the disciples, we have the early church working hard to create the tools to continue this task of imitating Jesus.

The result of taking the disclosure of the Eternal Word in Jesus as the control (not that Burridge puts it like this, but this I think is how a theologian should interpret his argument) is striking. We are required by Christ to live within an inclusive community, which does not rush to exclude, even when we think the other is gravely mistaken. It is a call for a conversation around the most exacting standards of holiness within community.

In this book Richard Burridge actually provides an important argument that supports a Barthian approach to scripture. For Barth, there is an important connection between the Word and the text of scripture. For after all, it is the Bible that tells us about the Word, which is Jesus. Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* explores at some length precisely what it means to call the Bible the Word of God. Barth explains:

God is not an attribute of something else, even if this something else is the Bible. God is the Subject, God is Lord. He is Lord even over the Bible and in the Bible. The statement that the Bible is the Word of God cannot therefore say that the Word of God is tied to the Bible. On the contrary, what it must say is that Bible is tied to the Word of God. . . . If the Church lives by the Bible because it is the Word of God, that means that it lives by the fact that Christ is revealed in the Bible by the work of the Holy Spirit.²

For Karl Barth, the primary disclosure of God is the Word of God which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For Barth, the Bible becomes the Word as it witnesses to the Word which is Jesus. And the manner in which this occurs is also determined by the Word of God himself. Barth writes:

As to when, where and how the Bible shows itself to us in this event as the Word of God, we do not decide, but the Word of God Himself decides, at different times in the Church and with different men confirming and renewing the event of instituting and inspiring the prophets and apostles

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), p. 513.

to be His witnesses and servants, so that in their written word they again live before us, not as men who once spoke in Jerusalem and Samaria, to the Romans and Corinthians, but as men who in all the concreteness of their own situation and action speak to us here and now.³

For Barth, there is a trinitarian dynamic at work between the Word of God, which is Jesus, and the Bible, as the Word of God. The Bible, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, can become an immediate text, confronting a particular moment, with the disclosure of God, which is the Eternal Word (perhaps this also happened in South Africa). With this emphasis on the primary Word as the Eternal Word, which completely interpenetrates the life of Jesus of Nazareth, we can see that our primary obligation is to read a life – a life which was very enigmatic.

So we return to Richard Burridge and the gospels. Our definitive disclosure of what God is like is a poor young man from Nazareth, who took enormous risks as he reached out to include the marginalised – especially women, the poor and the reviled. He found himself a victim of power – finally dying as a common criminal at the hands of the occupying power. Yet remarkably, the movement he birthed believed that death was not able to hold him. Reports of his resurrection started to circulate and so the church was born.

So what do we know about God from the Eternal Word? We know that God is on the side of those who are least fortunate. We know that the love of God is willing to go to any length for the sake of humanity. We know that in our moments of despair God promises to create hope. We know that we should treat this life as authoritative. We should imitate the ‘words and deeds’ of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now our obligation as Christians is to recognise the authority of this life in guiding our witness today. This obligation extends to our interpretation of the rest of the Bible. If the Bible is interpreted in such a way as to contradict what we ‘read’ from the life, death and resurrection of the Eternal Word, then we have an obligation to revisit the text of the Bible. Although slavery is instituted in Leviticus and condoned in the pastoral epistles, the legitimacy of slavery is clearly incompatible with the disclosure of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Reading the Qur’an can be difficult, but reading a life is harder.⁴ So Christians are, right from the outset, bound to have to live with a pluralism

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 530–1.

⁴ I do of course recognise that reading the Qur’an is difficult. And I am very interested in the various ways in which the Qur’an is interpreted, particularly with the emphasis on those verses which have local significance and those which have more universal significance.

of positions; hence the importance of the inclusive community. Although the slave traders are outside the zone of acceptable pluralism, there are a multitude of positions with which the life of Jesus might be compatible. The areas of debate include the following: gratuitous war is clearly unacceptable, but the use of force to create a just peace might be acceptable; exploitative capitalism is clearly wrong, but the use of the profit motive to create an effective system of resource allocation might be acceptable; and life should not be created to be destroyed, but the cultivation of stem cells for the advancement of medical techniques that heal genetic diseases might be appropriate. Reading a life does have a major advantage over a text. It permits significant flexibility over time. We are imitating the 'words and deeds' of Jesus. This exercise starts in the New Testament and we can see how the church struggles to arrive at the appropriate inclusive position over the gentiles and the Jewish law. And so it continues with Augustine and Aquinas.

The movement for Christian thought is to move constantly, to and fro, from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (as it flows through the sacraments and life of the church) to the particularities of each situation. With the Spirit of God constantly making the Eternal Word present to each situation, we can and should allow our faith to engage with each situation making use of all the resources available to us. The resources flow from our conviction of the threefold nature of God: a creator who creates every single life and loves each particular life and seeks to disclose truth to those lives; a revealer and redeemer who discloses the nature of God (thereby providing a definitive norm) and also redeems all people; and a Spirit who is constantly making God present and allowing us to see God in new and different ways.

On this account, Richard Burridge has provided the New Testament justification for the Barthian view of the relationship between the Eternal Word and the Written Word.

The author's lack of appreciation for his own remarkable argument

Perhaps it is only after one has finished a book that one starts to appreciate the full implications of the argument. It is in the last chapter that Richard starts to relate his argument with the range of traditional approaches to New Testament ethics. So, in his thoughtful chapter on apartheid, he starts by explaining how 'authorial intent' can be problematic (and not a control on what is biblical, p. 353). Then he moves to the opposite extreme 'reader-response criticism' (p. 354); then he brings 'the two horizons together' (pp. 356–7) and it is here he engages with the approach of Richard Hays. All these approaches are found wanting because of the lack of appreciation of genre. So Burridge writes, 'We have argued throughout this book that genre

is the key to understanding of texts, providing a kind of agreement, often unspoken or even unconscious, between author and audience, to guide their proper interpretation' (p. 360). Burridge is right, genre is the key, but what he overlooks is that it is not simply a literary key, but a theological key.

As he works through the apartheid case study, he examines 'rules and commands' (p. 363), 'principles and universal values' (p. 368), 'examples and paradigms' (p. 376), 'overall symbolic worldview' (p. 382) and 'reading together in an inclusive community' (p. 388). It is this latter approach which Burridge believes emerges from his argument.

However, what he overlooks is that all his approaches are assuming the primacy and centrality of the Written Word. He lacks the recognition that his argument is bringing together the Eternal Word as the control over the interpretation of the Written Word (as an act of fidelity to the approach to ethics taken by the rest of the New Testament). He needed an ethical approach which makes it clear that discerning what God is like from the Eternal Word is the primary responsibility of the Christian and the primary obligation of the Christian faithful to the New Testament witness.

It is an approach which makes sure that all scripture is interpreted through a christological lens. What Burridge has done is demonstrate that Barth's approach to scripture is in agreement with the message and meaning of the New Testament.

Conclusion

This is a vitally important book. This is a book on which others will want to build. What Christian piety has known for a century – you discover what God requires by looking at Jesus – Burridge has confirmed. What various trajectories of Christian ethical reflection have overlooked, Burridge has corrected. The challenge of learning to read a life, Burridge has illuminated. We should all be grateful to Richard Burridge and this remarkable text.

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