

Richard Burridge's Achievement

by Ian Markham

In late October, Richard Burridge, dean of King's College London and professor of biblical interpretation there, was the first non-Roman Catholic to receive the prestigious Ratzinger Prize, set up as a kind of Nobel Prize for Theology. (Previous winners include Brian Daley, S.J. and Rémi Brague.) In giving him the award, the Vatican recognized an Anglican scholar who pioneered a distinctive understanding of the gospels, the implications of whose work still need unpacking.

Anyone trained in theology before the 1980s will recollect that New Testament scholars, working with a modern understanding of biography influenced by Freud, Marx, and Durkheim, said that the gospels were not biographies. They claimed that the gospels do not describe Jesus' appearance or personality or his setting within the sociopolitical and historical events of the tumultuous first century. The true story, whatever that was, was assumed to have been lost or significantly revised in the thirty-year gap between the life of Jesus and the writing of the first gospel.

Our teachers took the line first espoused by Rudolf Bultmann and the form critics: The gospels were *sui generis*, "a unique word for the Unique Word." This meant that study of the gospels was a study of the imaginative minds of the early Church, because the gospels were not about Jesus but about the values and arguments among the first Christians. The claim that in Jesus we were encountering God Incarnate was evaded: Jesus was invisible, hidden behind stories that told us more about the early Christian communities when the gospels

were written than about Jesus himself as the source of those stories.

Pope Benedict XVI describes the difficulty in his foreword to the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*: Historical-critical scholarship separated the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith." As it advanced, it made "finer and finer distinctions between layers of tradition in the Gospels, beneath which the real object of faith—the figure [*Gestalt*] of Jesus—became increasingly obscured and blurred." That produced "the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him."

Many Christians now believe this, he noted. "Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air." Christians were losing the faith because they no longer trusted the gospels. The connection between the gospels and Jesus needed to be reestablished.

In the 1980s, a young priest trained in classics at the University of Oxford noted that, though the gospels are not biographies in a modern sense, that doesn't mean they are not biographies. They should be compared with their relatives in the Greco-Roman world, which also do not look anything like modern biographies. When compared with Isocrates' *Evagoras* or Xenophon's *Agésilas*, or Philo's *Moses* or Tacitus' *Agricola* or Plutarch's *Lives*, the gospels fit right in.

Determining the genre of the gospels determines expectations. In the same way "once upon a time" tells us to expect a fairy tale and "here is the news" to expect a report on the

day's significant activities, the "*sui generis*" approach to the gospels invited the expectation that we would learn about the early Church, not the life of a historical figure. Burridge wanted to transform our expectations and reinstate the expectation that the gospels are about a remarkable life that had transformed the lives of their writers.

So in his groundbreaking book *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, originally published in 1992, Burridge sets the argument out with precision and overwhelming evidence. Following Wittgenstein's idea of "family-resemblance theory," he compares the generic features of ancient Lives—such as length, style, atmosphere, purpose, external structure, and so on—with those of the gospels.

He particularly tackles the objection that the gospels concentrate too much on the death of Jesus to be biographies. In Greco-Roman biography, the hero's attitude to his death and his final acts or words are crucial, normally taking up 15 to 25 percent of the narrative. Mark gives 20 percent to Jesus' death; Matthew and Luke, a little less, at 15 to 16 percent; and John (with the Last Supper discourses included) 30 percent.

But the killer argument comes with the subject. Counting endless verbs by hand in his spare time, Burridge discovered that in ancient biography, 25 to 30 percent of the verbs have the hero as the subject, and an additional 15 to 30 percent of the verbs are found in the hero's sayings, speeches, or quotations. This concentration of verbs is found in no other genre of ancient literature.

Ian Markham is dean and president of Virginia Theological Seminary.

The gospels have the same concentration of verbs. In Mark, 25 percent of the verbs have Jesus as the subject, and 20 percent more are spoken by him in teaching and parables; in Matthew and Luke, around 58 percent of the verbs have Jesus as the subject or capture the teaching and parables of Jesus; and about half of the verbs in John have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips, with a massive 10 percent of those being spoken by Jesus about himself. No one could now argue that the gospels are not about Jesus, as they detail his deeds and words, his life, death, and resurrection.

Burridge started unpacking the implications of reading the gospels as Greco-Roman biographies. Their first hearers would recognize the single scroll, with its thin chronological structure, and with the author arranging the material about the subject appropriately and imaginatively.

They would have understood that the gospels are invitations to imitate and admire “what Jesus did and taught” (look at Acts 1:1). They would have known that the writers are artists who were not simply putting stories together in a semi-random way but were creating a distinctive portrait. They would have entirely understood that the emphasis on the final week of the life of Jesus was the culmination of the evangelists’ narratives.

In his *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* published two years later, Burridge unpacks each gospel’s distinctive power and portrait. On the way, he takes issues with those scholars who believe that the Incarnation is found only in John’s Gospel, and he illustrates how a high Christology is found in all four gospels. Rather than getting bogged down in the minutiae of this or that passage, he shows that the achievement of the gospels is to help us understand why discipleship makes sense, why the Jesus whose life they capture in different ways is worthy of following.

It was probably for these two books that the award was conferred on Burridge. In the official citation read before Pope Francis presented the prize, Cardinal Camillo Ruini pointed to Burridge’s “great contribution in that decisive area of the historical and theological recognition of the Gospels’ inseparable connection to Jesus of Nazareth,” a contribution that resolves the problem identified by Pope Benedict. The award ceremony came at the end of a three-day international symposium about the gospels and Pope Benedict’s account of Jesus, at which Burridge was the only non-Catholic to give a keynote address.

However, the next volume in the Burridge project is, I think, even more remarkable and interesting. *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, published in 2007, is the finest book written on New Testament ethics for decades. It transcends the remarkable achievement of Richard Hays’ *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

It is a truly great book because Burridge understands the hermeneutical key. Greco-Roman biography is an invitation to imitate. In reading the gospels, the Christian must pay attention not only to Jesus’ teaching but also to all those verbs where Jesus is the subject. In other words, both what Jesus says and what Jesus does are important.

Unlike most writers on New Testament ethics, who focus on the teaching, such as the Sermon on the Mount, Burridge gives extended attention to the ethic derived from the narrative of the deeds of Jesus. Too many Christians focus on the particular teachings of Christ but overlook the interesting tension between his teachings and his actions.

The teaching of Jesus on marriage and divorce is demanding; it is an invitation to recover the divine intention for human relationships. The genre of the gospels points to the significance

of the way he applied this rule. He was a person who associated and took table fellowship with those who, like prostitutes and adulterers, clearly were not living this ethic. He does not make a “change in behavior” a prior condition for his presence.

Here the genre of the gospels points to the very heart of the gospel: God calls us to be more than we are but never gives up on anyone. As Jesus did, so should we. To lead us to imitate Jesus is why the gospels were written. Burridge argues that this theme of imitation is constantly carried into the early Christian community through the letters of Paul.

New Testament scholars and theologians alike are working hard now to absorb Burridge’s insights. The previous dismissal of the genre of biography because the gospels do not create a psychological and sociological portrait of Jesus has been exposed as facile and misguided. Fewer scholars direct their scholarly energy to insisting that gospel passages tell us more about the communities of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John than about Jesus, the source of those passages. The excessive anxiety about the thirty-year oral tradition between the life of Jesus and the first gospel has dissipated. The propensity of scholars (and Christians more generally) to confine the ethical teaching of Jesus to his words has been shown to be a misunderstanding of the genre; the contrasting actions of Jesus are just as important. This is the achievement of Burridge.

Scholars in other fields, such as dogmatic theology, are starting to read Burridge and are finding his work illuminating. Understanding how to “read” the Eternal Word and how to distinguish effectively between the Eternal Word made flesh and the written Word of Scripture is difficult. Burridge connects the two. The written Word is about the Eternal Word. The theme of the New

Testament is that one should imitate the words and deeds of Christ.

Richard Burrige has set an agenda that will provide decades of work for biblical scholars, historians, and

practical theologians, and for theologians who recognize their primary vocation as a service to the Church. I suspect that biblical scholarship might well divide into pre-Burrige

and post-Burrige, such is the significance of his work. Burrige resolved the dilemma described by Benedict and for this has been given the prize named in his honor. **Fr**

PUNCHING THE CLOCK

Our children, now lanky teenagers and just past
The part where it's all about them, are hilariously
Interested about such odd parental phrases as *the*
Cat's pajamas and *punching a clock* and *Captain*
Kangaroo and *bomb shelter*. Every other day we
Have to explain, to general entertainment, things
Like this, and I have found that thrashing toward
Definition leaves me pondering them for a while.
I did punch a clock, for my first professional job;
I had not thought of that in thirty years. This was
In Chicago, and at four minutes to five the lobby
Of the building would fill with people from three
Floors, waiting to punch out. It was a small lobby
And no one said anything, and there wasn't a line.
It was sort of a sweet time, actually. People knew
Who should go first: the charwomen and janitors.
The sound the time-clock made when it crunched
Your card did sound exactly like a metallic punch.
Not even the chief of the company would push by
The charwomen and janitors. Some people would
Read the *Sun-Times*; never the *Tribune*, I noticed.
It was sort of a peaceful time, actually. You could
Hear the elevated train go by and know it was just
About five o'clock. We think we forget things but
We don't, you know. As people punched out they
Flowed through the doors like kids leaving school.
I suppose that clock was removed many years ago,
But it wasn't, you see. There it is on the wall. And
Here we are, set on the steps as if for a photograph,
And no one is speaking, and you can hear the train
Coming, and faintly there is a rustle of newspapers.

—Brian Doyle