SJT 63(3): 346–352 (2010)
doi:10.1017/S0036930610000438
© Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd 2010

Response

I am extremely grateful to everyone who participated in the discussion of my book, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*.[1] Thanks go first to Professor Kenneth Newport for organising and chairing the session on the 'Use, Influence and Impact of the Bible' at the SBL Meeting in Boston in November 2008, as well as for his interest in the project over the last decade. Also each of the panellists have contributed so much to my work throughout the gestation and writing of this book.

Ian Markham has a special talent for encouraging others to research, write and publish. Ian first provoked me to think about the biblical basis for Christian ethics when we taught at the University of Exeter twenty years ago; he brought me to the joint meeting of the AAR and SBL fifteen years ago, challenging me to get writing again and he hosted me in Hartford in 2006 to complete this book. Without him, *Imitating Jesus* would never have seen the light of day!

I met Francis Watson when researching my doctoral studies on gospel genre, and then we were colleagues together at King's College London during the 1990s, before he went on to Aberdeen and now Durham. Even then, he challenged me to explore how New Testament ethics related to the historical Jesus, and we have debated biblical interpretation over the years, as I have admired his important works.

Encouraged by Markham and challenged by Watson, I had drafted an outline on New Testament ethics, which was radically affected by Richard Hays's F. D. Maurice lectures at King's College, later published as *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.[2] Richard has been particularly generous and patient through subsequent years, as we dialogued in the SNTS New Testament Ethics Seminar and elsewhere. As Richard's paper has correctly noted, our books have much in common: *The Moral Vision* has been the lodestar throughout my research, and I have made students at King's read it as well as teaching it in places like Regent College Vancouver, Fuller Seminary and Virginia Theological Seminary. I state in my first chapter that *The Moral Vision* is 'a key text with which we will be in dialogue throughout this study'.[3]

[1] Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

[2] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco and Edinburgh: HarperSanFrancisco and T & T Clark, 1996).

[3] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, p. 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I would also like to thank Professor Jan van der Watt of Pretoria University and Professor Jonathan Draper from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, both of whom participated in the original panel discussion at SBL, but unfortunately are not included in this revision for publication. Regular visits to South Africa over a decade brought home that how we read the Bible can be literally a matter of life and death – so I am grateful for the encouragement and hospitality of Jan and Jonathan and others like Professor Gerald West, as well as, of course, to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to whom the book is dedicated.

Rather than reply to these stimulating papers individually, I have identified several key themes which have emerged through them, although unfortunately time and space do not permit a full response to everything!

The Historical Jesus

Markham has noted that the life and ministry of Jesus have been severely neglected in Christian ethics, in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, and correctly points out that I consider this to be 'severely misguided'. This is borne out by the survey of scholarship in the first chapter of *Imitating Jesus*, where I conclude that few books on New Testament Ethics include the teaching and activity of Jesus of Nazareth, and that those that do so tend to have him at the end of the process rather than starting with him.

Both Hays and Watson rightly draw out the connection between my earlier work on the gospels as biography and how this later book reflects upon the implications of the biographical approach for New Testament ethics. Therefore, despite the scholarly tendency not to do so, we are compelled to start with Jesus, as the one who brings it all into being, as I argue using the archaeological metaphor.[4] Watson proposes instead that 'New Testament ethics should concern itself with the writings of the New Testament' and in this way he aligns himself with the approaches of Meeks and Matera.[5] Yet he also wants to go beyond them by asserting that, because the gospels are biographies, 'they give us access to Jesus as interpreted by his early followers'. But we must examine how these interpretations are related to the actual life, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Markham makes it clear that in what he terms 'the Eternal Word', the revelation of God in Jesus, is the primary disclosure which the written word portrays for us in these biographical accounts of his life.

[4] Ibid., pp. 20–1.

[5] W. A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); F. J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hays raises the question about the relation of the archaeological metaphor to my other image of the text as stained glass, mediating between a window giving clear access to what is beyond it and a silvered mirror which only reflects back what is in front of it. He is right that the biographical approach means that we need to focus primarily on the portrait within the glass or text. But a stained glass window can still give access to what lies behind it, though it will be shadowy, coloured by the glass and probably visible only in its main outlines. Thus, in my section about the historical Jesus, I seek only to establish the main outlines to provide some basic grounding for all that follows, namely that Jesus of Nazareth existed, that he is best understood within the context of restoration eschatology as a preacher of the kingdom of God rather than primarily a teacher of ethics, and that he had a very mixed following including many undesirables, all of which led to his death by crucifixion which, unlike similar prophetic leaders, was not followed by the end of his movement.[6] Interestingly, this list is not so different from Hays's own list in *Moral Vision*;[7] however, I consider that the biographical approach makes it necessary to start with this, rather than after some 160 pages, as Hays does. This search for the historical Jesus gives us the basic outline with the two key facts that Jesus was seeking a response to his preaching of the kingdom of heaven and that he was followed by undesirables and the marginalised – hence the early accusation that he was letting 'the wicked' into the kingdom.[8] Furthermore, it is significant that these two elements of Jesus' preaching the kingdom and eating and living with undesirables are accepted by most historical Jesus scholars across the board, from Crossan and the Jesus Seminar to E. P. Sanders and N. T. Wright, giving us more solid bedrock upon which to build than dealing with just the gospel portraits as Watson suggests, along with Meeks and Matera.

Furthermore these two elements – preaching and living/eating – cohere nicely with the basic structure of all ancient biography, namely a combination of the subject's deeds and words. Luke makes this double aspect explicit with 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). Yet Watson titles his paper 'Can the historical Jesus *teach* ethics?'[9] and concentrates mostly upon Jesus' words and sayings. However, I argue throughout *Imitating Jesus* that, while Jesus' words and teaching give us some very demanding content to ethics, the fact that they are part of his prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God, which is earthed in his acceptance of undesirables and the marginalised,

[6] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 34–9.
[7] Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 158–68.
[8] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 70–3.
[9] My emphasis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also provides a pattern for how we are to treat other people today. Watson recognises this vital point in his quotation from *Imitating Jesus* (p. 48), but his subsequent paragraphs are concerned only with traditional historical critical analysis of various sayings, once again ignoring the wider narrative context of the rest of Jesus' life and ministry. Yet, as Markham points out, it is in this life, death and resurrection that God is properly and fully revealed.

Love and the New Testament

This double aspect of words and deeds is also crucial for the thorny issue of love. I argue that Jesus was primarily seeking a response to his preaching of the kingdom of God, and that response is a corporate experience of living alongside others who also respond. This means that the love command is not just at the heart of Jesus' teaching, but needs to be earthed in accepting others as we have been accepted, and welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us, as Paul puts it in Romans 15:7 – one of the reasons why I also argue in *Imitating Jesus* that Paul is properly understood as a faithful follower of Jesus, and not as the founder of a new religion.[10]

I recognise that this can lead to what Jan van der Watt called 'fuzzy love' or to the attitude which Richard Hays characterises as 'a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence'.[11] I am sorry if Richard feels that I refer to that phrase too often in my book (actually it is only seven times!) – but I do think it is a wonderful line, typical of his style. Of course, I do not consider Hays to be a 'disapproving curmudgeon' and I know that he is fond of Lennon and McCartney! In fact, I agree with him that too easy an acceptance of 'all you need is love' to cover everything is not what the New Testament means by the word 'love'. For Paul especially, as Hays makes clear, love is given a sharper definition in Jesus' death on the cross, which becomes one of Hays's focal lenses to assist the synthetic task of pulling the moral vision of the New Testament into clarity.[12]

Hays suggests that I confuse the descriptive and synthetic tasks. While he accepts that love is important in describing the ethics in Paul, John and other texts, he does not consider it useful as a lens to bring everything into a synthetic focus. My concern with Hays's three lenses relates to where he gets them from, and whether they work equally well across the New Testament as a whole. I have noted elsewhere that Hays derives these focal lenses from his opening study of Paul, where actually they work quite well, but I am less

[10] Ibid., pp. 81–154; it was a pity that constraints of time and space did not permit detailed discussion of my chapter on Paul in the panel, or in these papers.

[11] Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 203.

[12] Ibid., p. 197.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sure that they can be applied across the rest of the New Testament without the effect being more flattening than focusing.[13] Therefore, I have argued in response that: 'If we must have a "focal image", perhaps Christology would be better because it arises directly out of the biographical genre of the gospels and fits into the central concerns of all the New Testament writers. The gospels' picture of Jesus as the one who brings the love of God among us saves "love" from lapsing into Hays' objection of it being "vapid", and instead incarnates it in a human life.'[14]

This is also why, in an extensive chapter on John's Gospel, I argued against the usual scholarly consensus that the Fourth Gospel is written for an introverted sectarian group and has no ethical relevance beyond a narrow love for other community members.[15] Instead, I suggest that John's portrayal of Jesus as the incarnation of divine love coming to teach us the truth has enormous ethical implications. I am grateful that Hays likes my 'provocative counter-reading', and to Jan van der Watt for noting how my biographical approach draws attention to the importance of narrative in John. Both of these points about the centrality of love and the Fourth Gospel take us back, of course, to Markham's main point about God being ultimately revealed as we read a life.

Finally, Hays notes that *Imitating Jesus* concentrates on Paul and the gospels, and wonders what would have happened if I had considered the deutero-Paulines, the Catholic epistles, Hebrews and Revelation. This is a fair point, and I had intended to include them originally. Unfortunately, the honest explanation is the same as Hays himself gives for why he does not deal with the important issues of the relationship of men and women and also that of wealth and possessions, namely the practical limits of time and space.[16] However, I do consider actually quite a lot of material from the deutero-Pauline letters in the Paul chapter, while I answer Hays's question about the rest of the New Testament with a preliminary sketch of how christology and a call to the imitation of Jesus still permeates these other books, even though they do not have biographical narrative.[17]

The inclusive community and South Africa

In the final chapter of my book, I move from the rest of the New Testament to consider various methodologies for applying New Testament ethics to today's

[13] See my reviews of Hays in *Theology* 101 (799) (1998), pp. 54–5, and in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 102 (1998), pp. 71–3.
[14] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, p. 359.
[15] Ibid., pp. 285–346.
[16] Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 316, 463–4.
[17] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 348–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

issues, concluding that 'Hays' fourfold method is probably the best current account', especially with his stress on genre.[18] Therefore, I look at the four main genres and types of ethical material in the New Testament – commands, principles, paradigmatic examples and the overall biblical worldview – in the light of the debate about apartheid as a 'test-case'.[19] I am grateful for the comments made by Professors van der Watt and Draper in the SBL panel about this chapter, but it also causes Hays to ask questions about inclusivity, judgement, sin and violence to which I want to respond briefly.

Hays wonders whether my stress on inclusivity really works for Paul, who, as Hays rightly stresses, focuses upon the cross as a 'paradigm of self-giving love'. But this is precisely why I consider Paul to be inclusive, unlike the common interpretation of him as essentially negative, being anti-sex, anti-women, anti-gay, etc.[20] I find it staggering that all the rich theological and christological understanding of incarnation and atonement in Philippians 2 is actually introduced by Paul to teach a simple ethical lesson about being inclusive and regarding 'others as better than yourselves', looking to their interests (Phil 2:3–4). My book was written in the context of bitter arguments between Christians over things like homosexuality and the role of women in church leadership, where each side seems to dismiss and insult those with whom they disagree, often through internet blogs and websites. Hays rightly draws attention to Jesus' attacks on hypocrites and those who reject his proclamation of the kingdom, and none of my stress on inclusion is directed at these. Rather, it is about how we treat others who also respond to what God has done in Jesus, but who hold different views from ourselves. It was the rejection of people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the refusal even to accept them as fellow Christians which led the Dutch Reformed Church not only to support apartheid, but also to be unable to have their interpretation of scripture challenged by liberationists like Tutu and Boesak.

Hays draws attention to my book's cover painting by Lorenzo Lotto, of the woman taken in adultery, to illustrate the theme of Jesus as the friend of sinners. However, we also chose it because of all the pointing fingers in the painting, reflecting the tendency to reject others with whom we disagree. Hays asks what it might mean for the faithful to 'sin no more' and what my approach on the imitation of Jesus might mean for questions of violence and war, which I do not consider. The original intention for my book was to be in two halves, with New Testament ethics first, followed by an examination of the use of the New Testament in contemporary ethical debate over things

[18] Ibid., pp. 347–63.
[19] Ibid., pp. 363–409.
[20] Ibid., pp. 116–17, 154.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press

like money, sex, power, violence and the value of human life. The length of the treatment of the former led to the publication of *Imitating Jesus* on its own, but I am now working on a second book, where indeed I will share Hays's opposition to things like just war theory. However, I also have to recognise that other faithful Christians who say their prayers and read their Bibles hold different views from both Hays and myself on this and many other issues. Unlike the approach of the Dutch Reformed Church, I cannot dismiss them or reject them as atheists, if I want to imitate the example of Jesus. Rather we need to travel together in response to the call of God in Christ.

Therefore, in conclusion, I want to return to Markham's fascinating paper which just shows what we have lost in AAR not wanting to have conferences jointly with SBL. Markham is quite right that I had not understood that my approach in *Imitating Jesus* had such significant theological implications for the relationship of the Eternal Word and the Written Word – and I am still not sure I completely understand it all now! However, I am excited if the biographical approach which has arisen from all my work over many decades is not just a literary-narrative key to understanding the scriptures, but also has theological implications for how we relate to the divine. If I may conclude by venturing beyond the normal territory of the biblical scholar, surely the perichoretic love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity is the ultimate inclusive community? The extraordinary thing, as André Rublev's famous icon reminds us, is that this community of the Trinity seeks to include us within that dance of love between the Eternal Word with his Father and the Spirit. Furthermore, as we are included, so we find that others with whom we disagree, whether about apartheid, or violence, or whatever, are also welcomed. For this reason, my whole approach has been to argue that to imitate Jesus in both his words and his deeds must lead us to an inclusive community, and ultimately to the trinitarian love of God.

Richard A. Burridge
King's College London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK
richard.burridge@kcl.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000438 Published online by Cambridge University Press