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A Discussion: Richard Burridge's Jesus

Response to Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*[1]

I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this debate on a book that I have watched in the making, from a distance, over the past ten years or more. Richard Burridge was a faithful participant in the New Testament Ethics Seminar at the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, a seminar that I had the privilege of co-chairing, along with Wolfgang Schrage and Andreas Lindemann. During the years of that working group Richard presented early drafts of material that adumbrated the basic themes of *Imitating Jesus*. Consequently, he and I have been discussing our common interests in these matters for quite a while. Anyone who reads Richard's substantial new work alongside my earlier book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, will see that we don't always agree, but there are actually a fair number of commonalities – perhaps more commonalities than would be conveyed by a casual survey of Richard's explicit references to my work.[2]

For that reason, I would like to begin by mentioning a number of things that I like about Richard's book:

1. First of all, it gives serious explicit attention to the role of narrative in ethics.
2. *Imitating Jesus* does a good job of building on the foundation of Richard's earlier work on the biographical genre of gospels and showing how it might matter for ethics. Thus, it represents a coherent intellectual trajectory in Richard's own scholarship and, at the same time, shows how technical judgements about ancient literary genres can have important theological consequences.
3. Richard's book performs a service for theological ethics by reclaiming and highlighting the importance of the *imitatio Christi* – a theme long out of favour in much Protestant writing in this field. I would especially applaud his appropriate emphasis on the significant role of the story of Jesus and the imitation theme in Paul's letters.
4. *Imitating Jesus* rightly draws attention to a tension within the New Testament writings themselves (as well as in the subsequent interpretative tradition) between radical moral rigorism and radical love and forgiveness.

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

[2] R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

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5. Nonetheless, Richard argues for the coherence of the New Testament's ethical witness, and contends for compassionate life-giving readings – in opposition to those forms of the hermeneutics of suspicion which tend to blame the Bible for all the world's ills. By contrast, Richard exemplifies a hermeneutics of trust and illustrates how the New Testament might be read as a positive witness to reconciliation.
6. The chapter on John is a provocative counter-reading to accounts of the Fourth Gospel that have been current in the academy for a long time. I have some questions about this chapter, but it poses important issues.
7. And finally, let it be said, I am quite happy for Richard to remind us all that the New Testament consistently bears witness to *the identity of Jesus* as its central theme.

Having said all that, however, the fact remains that I do have a few significant points of difference with Richard, both methodological and substantive. In the following brief remarks, I will sketch a few critical issues for conversation.

What is the normative role of the reconstructed Jesus of history for theological ethics? Perhaps the clearest way to put this question is to ask about the relation between two different metaphors that Richard uses to describe his project – two metaphors which seem incongruous. In his introduction, Richard uses a *visual* metaphor to describe the way in which readers might approach the gospels. Historical critics have sought to use them as windows through which we can look to find the historical Jesus 'behind' the text; alternatively, some postmodern critics regard the gospels – indeed, all texts – as mirrors in which we see not Jesus himself but our own reflection, so that we can speak merely about the experience of different readers or reading communities in constructing images 'in front of' the text. But, in contrast to both of these reading strategies, Richard helpfully suggests that we understand the gospels to be 'more like stained glass': our interest as interpreters should focus chiefly on 'the picture *within* the glass', not on that which lies behind it historically or in front of it hermeneutically.[3] Unfortunately, however, this visual metaphor soon disappears and is replaced by the *archaeological* metaphor of excavating different layers, and getting back to a Jesus *beneath* the text, an exhumed Jesus who is the fundamental point of orientation for New Testament ethics.[4]

It is the latter metaphor which actually dominates Richard's presentation. I'm not sure what is gained by this, though I have a hunch that the motif of 'friend of sinners' features more prominently in Richard's historically excavated Jesus than it actually does in the canonical gospels; this motif

[3] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 22–5.
[4] e.g. ibid., pp. 34–5.

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becomes the determinative hermeneutical lens through which the gospels are read. Francis Watson is going to press further on questions about the role Richard assigns to critical reconstruction of the historical Jesus. So for my part, I simply want to ask about the relation between the *visual* metaphors and the *excavative* one. It seems to me that Richard's actual execution of the project privileges the metaphor of digging beneath the text, and that this seems to correlate with the 'windows' reading of Jesus, rather than the 'stained glass' reading, which would be more interested in the gospels as *testimony*.

I have already said that I am pleased to see the emphasis on *imitatio* motifs in the New Testament witnesses. But *I wonder whether in Paul's Letters and in the Gospel of Mark the imitation of the example of Jesus really has to do chiefly with inclusivity?* This emphasis on inclusivity might work to some extent for Matthew and Luke, but for Paul the imitation of Christ seems to focus exclusively on the cross, understood as a paradigm of self-giving love. It has to do with surrendering one's own prerogatives and interests for the sake of others, particularly others within the community of faith. Strikingly, however, when Paul seeks to argue for inclusion of Gentiles in the community of faith, he rarely if ever appeals to the example of Jesus' friendship with sinners (Rom 15:1–13 might constitute a possible exception). Rather, he argues from Old Testament prophecies and examples (particularly Abraham and Isaiah 40–55), or he argues on the basis of the community's experience of the reception of the Spirit. For Paul's theology, inclusivity is *made possible* by Jesus' death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit – but this is not the same thing as *imitating* Jesus. Similarly, for Mark the *imitatio* motif focuses relentlessly on taking on the cross and suffering for the sake of the Gospel and radical obedience. The formation of inclusive community hardly plays the same role in Mark that it does in Luke, for example. Thus, with regard to Mark's Gospel, I would say that Richard has taken a minor motif in Mark (fellowship with sinners) and blown it up into a thematic key.

Even though Richard talks about the eschatological character of Jesus' ethics, it seems to me that he *downplays the apocalyptic judgement texts in the New Testament*. Can these really be marginalised as thoroughly as Richard seems to do? The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels speaks not only gracious words of inclusion but also scathing words of judgement against hypocrites and those who reject his proclamation of the kingdom. When we consider these texts, we are not faced with a simple matter of juxtaposing Jesus' rigorous ethical teachings to his practices of gracious commensality with sinners. Rather, these texts require us to ask how commensality with sinners is related to the eschatological banquet from which the evildoers will be excluded. (Consider the parable of the wedding banquet, Matt. 22:1–14, for example, or the wicked tenants, Mark 12:1–12, or the parable of the sheep and the goats,

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Matt 25:31–46.) *Jesus is not only friend of sinners but also prophetic nemesis of the wicked*. According to the gospels, Jesus is not only an inspiring past figure whose teachings and actions are paradigmatic for us, but he is also *Lord* who demands obedience and who will at his coming sit in judgement of those who have not cared for the poor and hungry. This element of future judgement is occasionally noted in Richard's sketches of the gospels, but it seems to do little work at the normative level.

I have to say something, of course, about the role of *love* in New Testament ethics. Richard is especially unhappy with me for rejecting 'love' as a focal image for New Testament ethics. I lost count of the number of times that he quotes or alludes disapprovingly to a single sentence in *Moral Vision of the New Testament* that says the term 'love' can become 'a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence'.[5] In this discussion, it puts me in a difficult position to assume the role of the curmudgeon who frowns disapprovingly on the timeless Lennon–McCartney dictum that 'All you need is love'! But I must protest that Richard has persistently misconstrued my point. My hesitation about 'love' has to do with its usefulness as a *synthetic* image for *New Testament ethics as a whole*. There is no disputing that it is central for Paul and John, and in at least a few synoptic texts. *And I clearly say so in my book*. But love is not so central in Mark, for example, or in other key New Testament texts (Acts, Hebrews, Revelation). Further, my book clearly states that the *meaning* of love in the New Testament is consistently embodied and measured by one narrated norm: the death of Jesus – i.e. by the focal image of the *cross*. My intent, then, is not to do away with love: I am all in favour of it! My intent is to insist that it is given *specification* by the New Testament witnesses through the story of the self-emptying death of 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me', as Paul puts it in Galatians 2:20.

Richard's misreading of me on this last point is a symptom of a more pervasive problem: *a tendency to confuse the descriptive and synthetic tasks, or to collapse the latter into the former, so that all the witnesses end up saying more or less the same thing*. But this leaves me wondering what would happen if *Imitating Jesus* had gone on to explicate the significant portions of the New Testament that it omits: the deutero-Pauline letters, the Catholic Epistles, Hebrews, Revelation? Would these texts continue to support his inclusive ethics? Or in some cases would

[5] Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 202. The passage is cited by Burridge in *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 54–5 *et passim* thereafter. I would note also that the full sentence, of which he characteristically cites only the last bit, points to the popular misunderstanding and misuse of appeals to love: 'The term has become debased in popular discourse; it has lost its power of discrimination, having become a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence'.

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they be found wanting by the ethical criteria which emerge from Richard's interpretation of Jesus?

Finally, I want to conclude by calling attention to the image on the cover of the book: a dramatic sixteenth-century painting by Lorenzo Lotto which depicts Jesus' compassionate dealing with the woman taken in adultery. I don't know whether Richard chose the cover image, but it nicely exemplifies the book's central theme of Jesus as friend of sinners. (For the moment I leave aside the problem that this story (John 7:53–8:11) does not even belong to the original text of John's Gospel, let alone belong to a critical historical reconstruction of the Jesus of history!) The question I want to raise is what Richard makes of the ending of the story: Jesus tells the woman, 'Go and sin no more' (John 8:11). What would that mean? Once the woman has been treated mercifully by Jesus, she is summoned to a new life of obedience and radical discipleship. Presumably, she is called to change behaviours and patterns in her life. The sticky questions for New Testament ethics have to do not so much with who is initially welcomed into the community of faith as with the *shape* of the new life of radical obedience into which all who are welcomed are summoned to participate. We know from Richard's book that he believes the shape of that new life mandates racial inclusion and rules out apartheid. And I would of course agree. Yet it seems to me that *Imitating Jesus* (the book, I mean) gives us surprisingly little help on other hard questions which we face in discerning the actual shape of such obedience. What would it mean for the community of the faithful to take seriously Jesus' command to go and sin no more?

To end with a single example, should followers of Jesus serve as soldiers and employ violent means in defence of justice? I would think that if the imitation of Jesus is truly the central focus for New Testament ethics, a radical rejection of just war theory should follow almost inevitably. Yet Richard does not address this issue at all in his book. So I would like to know whether Richard would agree with me that imitating Jesus should preclude the usual 'Christian realist' arguments in support of just war. This, it seems to me, is the point where the discussion of imitating Jesus becomes both uncomfortable and interesting.

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