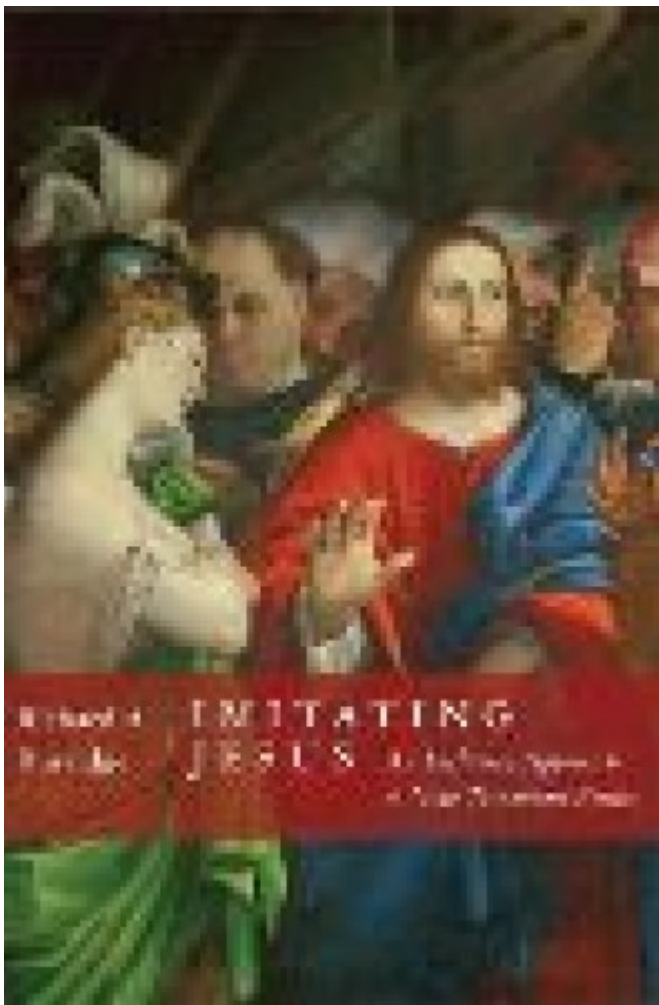


Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics

reviewed by [Valerie Abrahamsen](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics

Richard A. Burridge
Eerdmans

In the late 1970s, Dieter Georgi would begin his New Testament ethics class by speaking of hunger. In lectures that moved us students to tears, he spoke of the absolute necessity of placing ethics into real-world, tangible contexts, since the biblical writings emerged from specific contexts.

Richard Burrige has taken a similar approach in *Imitating Jesus*, deftly building his case for placing New Testament ethics in the context of South African apartheid. Burrige has unique qualifications for examining New Testament scholarship and the ostensibly Christian arguments on both sides of the apartheid question: as dean of King's College London and director of New Testament studies there, he has been at the forefront of training South African clergy, "especially those denied education under apartheid because of their colour." His approach to both the New Testament and apartheid is refreshing as well as authentic. He relies on a prayer circle in his life and work and dedicates this volume to "the rainbow people of South Africa, who have taught the rest of the world so much about how to interpret the New Testament in the midst of some of the most challenging ethical situations of recent history."

Burrige's basic approach when interpreting the four Gospels, Acts and the letters of Paul is based on genre: none of these canonical documents is an ethical treatise in the manner of other ancient literature, such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*; thus we search in vain for precise ethical prescriptions for our contemporary situation from Paul and the Gospel writers.

In constructive, civil and wide-ranging debate and dialogue with other scholars, Burrige returns time and again to Christology as the "biographical key to the gospels' hermeneutic." If we wish to imitate Jesus, we must take a holistic approach to the Jesus story, always keeping the person and actions of Jesus tied to his words. Burrige reminds us that the main goal of ancient biography was to lay out the life (and death) of the hero or other noteworthy person according to the author's perspective. When we start with this understanding, we can read the canonical writings about Jesus as texts that address all manner of ethical questions, both for early Christians and for us.

While it may be helpful for Burrige's readers to be acquainted with basic New Testament scholarship, he engages past scholarship so well and makes such clear, cogent arguments that readers relatively new to the topic will likely find his

approach useful. In brief, heavily footnoted sections in each chapter he introduces us to (or reminds us of) classic works in the field by E. P. Sanders, Wayne Meeks, J. T. Sanders, N. T. Wright, members of the Jesus Seminar (John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg and so on), Rudolf Bultmann and many others. Without ever defining *ethics*, Burrige shows that like the ethics born of Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus' ethic makes demands of us. As the Gospel writers insist, Jesus calls his disciples and they are compelled to respond—not solely as individuals but as members of a new community, a community based on and grounded in love.

Burrige does not shy away from tough and controversial aspects of the New Testament texts—the tension between love and the law, between Jesus as a moral exemplar and as someone who socialized with the lowest of the low, between our own pressing moral issues and the fact that Jesus never addressed those issues directly. Burrige expertly guides us through the morass. After providing a basic profile of Jesus, he focuses on Paul, then on Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. In each chapter Burrige engages in dialogue not only with standard New Testament scholarship but also with the newer perspectives grounded in archaeology and feminism. He is completely respectful toward Judaism and presents several helpful treatments of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism.

After analyzing the canonical literature and laying out the basics of what it means to imitate Jesus in words and actions, Burrige explicitly tackles apartheid in South Africa. Rather than presenting a short history of apartheid and of how the Bible was used to defend it, he weaves references to pro- and anti-apartheid persons and writings together with careful analysis of four types of ethical material culled from a variety of sources: material about obeying rules and prescriptive commands; about looking for principles and universal values; about following examples and paradigms; and about embracing an overall symbolic worldview. He brings his analysis to a powerful conclusion under the heading “reading together in an inclusive community,” advising us that “perhaps only a combination of traditional historical-critical studies with such open and inclusive community- or culture-based readings can avoid . . . oppressive conclusions.”

Imitating Jesus has much to commend it—an extensive bibliography, fine editing and excellent indexes of scriptural passages and ancient sources, subjects and modern authors. I was a bit surprised, however, that Burrige did not cite the work of Bernadette Brooten in discussing the homosexuality passages in Romans. Nor did he consult the Eerdmans-published dictionary *Women in Scripture* for details on the

various New Testament women he mentions; the articles by prominent scholars such as Ross Kraemer, Amy-Jill Levine and Mary Rose D'Angelo might have strengthened his arguments. Richard Pervo's excellent book *Dating Acts* would have helpfully informed Burrige's discussion of Luke/Acts, but *Imitating Jesus* may have already been nearing publication by the time it appeared. Readers may also find helpful the works of Katie G. Cannon, Kwok Pui-Lan and Allen Callahan on womanist ethics, Asian feminist and postcolonial theology, and African-American biblical interpretation, respectively, though Burrige doesn't discuss these either. None of these scholars is a New Testament ethicist per se, but their writings powerfully inform biblical ethics from important viewpoints and demonstrate other ways to imitate Jesus. These omissions, however, are minor shortcomings in an otherwise intriguing, accessible and helpful book.