

CHAPTER 1
JESUS IN THE MODERN WORLD



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

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About this Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

What Can We Believe? Jesus and the Modern Mind

The world's great spiritual voices have been few. Jesus stands out as unmistakably the greatest. What are the facts about his impact and influence? How far can reason take us in our quest for the truth about him?

What is at the back of our minds that prompts us to question one who has centred—and satisfied—the faith of the Christian centuries? Is it not that we are the products of our age and ask for evidence for what we believe, and before we believe?

Science has come and immeasurably added to the sum and certainty of modern knowledge. No subject remains where it was. New thinking and new attitudes of approach are the order of the day. We look at Jesus with the eyes of modern people.

We have been caught in one of the swiftest tides of history. Industrialisation, urbanisation, social upheaval, the pressure of a new morality—these strain old moorings. Spectacular scientific advances, and powers that no age has known

before that confront us with the terrifying alternatives of progress, or recession—these divert our gaze from old landmarks. Has the compass long lost its magnetism?

There are changes in perspectives, value judgments, motivations, that are too big to go unrealised.

From the very nature of what they have to give, science and technology concentrate attention on material values. They spread the secular mind. Other values and other thinking tend to go by default, or to be virtually denied. ‘Everywhere,’ says Dr A. M. Ramsey, ‘there is a rising belief in the omnicompetence of the technological sciences to explain man and to serve his needs.’⁸

To those who take this view, religion can easily seem irrelevant, no more than a left-over, a strangely tenacious survival from pre-scientific days.

This is no fault of science and technology. They have drawn on the best brains in the world, and the results in their own field have been magnificent. Not for the first time in history one aspect of human development has swept ahead, perhaps even ahead of itself. The challenge now is to balance material with spiritual values, and to keep alive the conscious and latent religious beliefs that have characterised humankind in all ages.

The challenge is sharper because it is becoming a particularity of the modern mind to be very much at home in a world that is bounded by birth and death.

⁸ *God, Christ and the World.*

To be in touch with the way many people think today is to realise that they have unusually little interest in the past, and even less interest in the possibility of any other life ahead. Their absorbed concern is for an interesting and vivid life *now*.

This colours any meaningful approach to Christianity, for Jesus may seem a figure from the past, and immortality wildly at variance with secular interests and assumptions.

It is a factor of real consequence in the build-up of people's minds today that some of the most spectacular strides in pure and applied science have been made. Those who have grown up since world war II have grown up with tremendous things—the television and computer, the acceleration of the population growth, the destruction of the natural environment, the problem of conserving it, the discovery of atomic fission and fusion, the biochemistry of the living cell, visits to the moon.

This gives rise to the exciting idea of a new world with new minds to match, and a tendency to disparage a past which never knew these things.

Those who enjoyed a fair span of life before these things happened, stretch their minds to the changes, and see them not so much as making a break with the past as presenting in sharper terms the ongoing challenge of life itself.

There can be flattery and illusion in the phrase 'modern man'. In 600 bc Thales of Miletus divided the solar year into 365 days, using the learning of Egypt, just as he learnt how

to foretell eclipses from the knowledge of Babylon. It was Democritus of Thrace (400–370 bc) who brought the natural sciences to astonishing heights and first postulated an atomic theory, but he too was a debtor to ancient Babylon and Egypt.

We have taken over from farthest antiquity more than we realise, and the surest way to bring a new Dark Age upon us might be to forget how earlier civilisations ran into theirs—various forms of the power game, engrossing sex, and a failure to balance material with spiritual need.

We hear much of ‘the new morality’ but a book by Bertrand Russell entitled *The New Morality*, raises the question of what in fact is ‘new’? Is not the best conscience of modern society haunted on points such as war, racial relationships, economic justice, and purity of heart, by a morality preached in Galilee which we have not yet achieved?

To think of religion as irrelevant, a dated thing, with which we can dispense, is to forget that the most unchanging elements in human history are the deep experiences of the human spirit. All people were ‘modern’ once and it would be hard to establish that we are finer people because we are cocooned in a more complicated technological environment. We have to ask what sort of a showing we make when we are stripped of our accessories.

Like all who have crossed the stage of life before us we can turn the drama of life into comedy, tragedy, or even plain farce. We are as vulnerable as people have ever been to moral failure, loss of nerve, and to ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ... the heartache and the thousand

natural shocks that flesh is heir to ... the dread of something after death—that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns’.

While material progress has been spectacular, moral progress has been fitful and uneven. Ours is an age that tops all others in the alleviation of pain. The triumphs of medicine and surgery exceed all praise. On a wide scale there is a blessed relief of drudgery through automation. Notable achievements of the welfare state have brought about a widening coverage of poverty, and diminished the woes of the sick and aged. Finer, and more open, educational opportunities, and the competent take-over of Christian social aims, have been brought about through the levelling of incomes and state subsidies.

Great enterprises like Christian Aid, Voluntary Service Overseas and other relief agencies have notably enlisted the support of youth. But youth itself in practically every land exhibits a new restiveness towards authority and tradition, and seems uncertain about former values and goals of life.

Comparative affluence, easy availability of the things money can buy, and the variety of commercialised entertainment, have not brought content. Peace of mind and happiness are not features of our day. Staggering numbers have need of psychiatric care. A rise in greed, dishonesty, violence, and crime, and a new permissiveness of lust and pornography, are hard to equate with progress. The secular city is a problem in itself. One has to come to a somewhat depressing conclusion that little that science has made available has helped modern humans to solve the dichotomy of their own

nature. The trouble may lie in the God-shaped blank in their hearts.

HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, who has travelled far and seen much, summed up our predicament as he saw it in his Commemoration Oration at King's College, London, in 1970:

Material development alone cannot sustain civilisation. To make life tolerable, and indeed possible, for intelligent man, there must be some criterion of right and wrong, some positive motivation, some vision of an ideal, some beckoning inspiration.

Without it we shall never get to grips with the population explosion, with race prejudice, with starvation, with the distribution of resources, with the conflicting demands of development and conservation, progress and pollution, or the control of the complex industrial communities, and the liberties of the individual.

Bishop Hugh Montefiore likewise insisted that the crisis facing people is fundamentally spiritual and that 'if man is not by his folly, frailty and ignorance to ruin his environment and with it his own future, then the most tremendous and unprecedented efforts to prevent this will be necessary'. Such motivation, Montefiore believed, can only come through a lively belief in God nourished through faith in the heroic figure of Jesus through whom God has disclosed himself to humankind.⁹

⁹ *Can Man Survive?*

But are we today likely to gain that 'vision of the ideal, that beckoning inspiration, that higher motivation' which earlier generations have certainly found in Christ? For we are a part of all that we have met, and in modern life we have met a great deal that has not advanced us in moral sensitivity or spiritual insight. We have been exposed to the daunting doubts of humanists, and worst of all, to a version of Christianity without challenge and without power, associated with a wonderless worship and a questionable God. In so far as these may have played a part in our conditioning can we be expected to come to a right estimate of Jesus?

There are regions of the highest truth that may depend for their appreciation on the kind of moral beings we choose to be. 'Blessed are the pure in heart', said Jesus. 'They see God.' Aldous Huxley accumulated the evidence for this by the scrutiny of many saintly lives. He shows that there are regions of spiritual understanding that are only accessible to those who have achieved love, purity of heart, humility of mind. But these are not virtues much to the forefront today.

Balzac, the eccentric genius, designed and built a house, omitting to leave room for a staircase. It had to be added on afterwards. In the building of the minds of many today, one can detect a parallel omission. Scanty attention has been paid to the construction of spiritual staircases. In some areas of modern education they are not taken into the plans. In others they are tolerated, but allowed to be frail and improvised structures, crowded into any corner not occupied by other more important interests.

So what does all this mean? As far back as Aristotle it was recognised that one could only understand a subject if one was familiar with a wide range of ideas and attendant considerations that gave the subject full significance and validity so that appreciation could begin. In the case of the Jesus it is very doubtful if many are acquainted with the broad facts and reasoned considerations that are essential for a right judgment of his significance. The tendency is to 'make do' with unrelated snippets of information, and to miss seeing the picture 'in the large'.

'Those who understand Christianity,' said a pilot, 'climb up to faith themselves, and then draw in the ladder after them.' His meaning is clear. Reason plays a necessary part in the achievement of faith, and when it is achieved it is easy to forget the steps that took us to it—steps of information, steps of experience, our own and other people's, and steps of spiritual growth.

This book aims at presenting some steps, and providing a ladder of reasoned thought that some have found useful.

We follow this glance we have taken at ourselves by a look at timeless elements in Jesus' teaching, and the depths in him to which some in all ages have responded. We note the durability of his influence, its expansion, and its striking fruitfulness and excellence. We check facts of historicity and the genuineness of the records. We see that the more we press forward our inquiry the more we become convinced that we are in touch with truth. We begin to understand the mysterious way in which he has revolutionised so many lives. We recognise how often he has established his influence in the face of difficulties and obstructive forces.

Simply in terms of achievement his uniqueness is forced upon us, with the question arising, is a life and influence like his an accident or a revelation?

Could it be that as both science and religion seem to indicate, there is a Mind behind all things? We examine the centuries of Old Testament witness to God, and the way its teaching seemed to set the stage for a supreme revelation, and how this expectation of Christ's contemporaries was fulfilled in him. We face what Professor C. F. D. Moule calls *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* with its weighty evidence for the resurrection. Did these early reporters heighten their story, or is the basic truth of it borne out by what Jesus has meant in human history? Can we say with Professor John Hick that 'everything was for him within the context of God's presence and purpose'?¹⁰

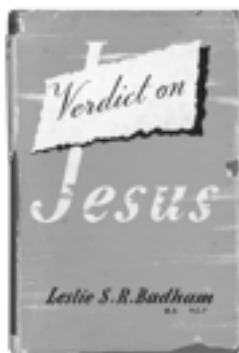
This book takes its title from the Courtroom of the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem where the High Priest passed on Jesus the verdict of blasphemy which, the prisoner knew, carried the penalty of death.

We re-open the case, looking alike at the evidence as Caiaphas heard it, and at new evidence that has accumulated since, with the question facing us afresh, what are we to make of it?

¹⁰ *Christianity at the Centre*

7 Decades

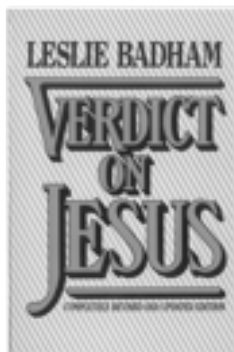
Verdict on Jesus through the years



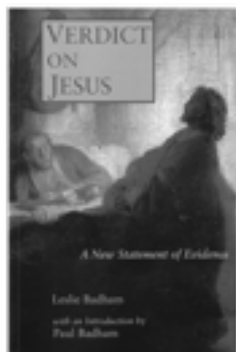
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

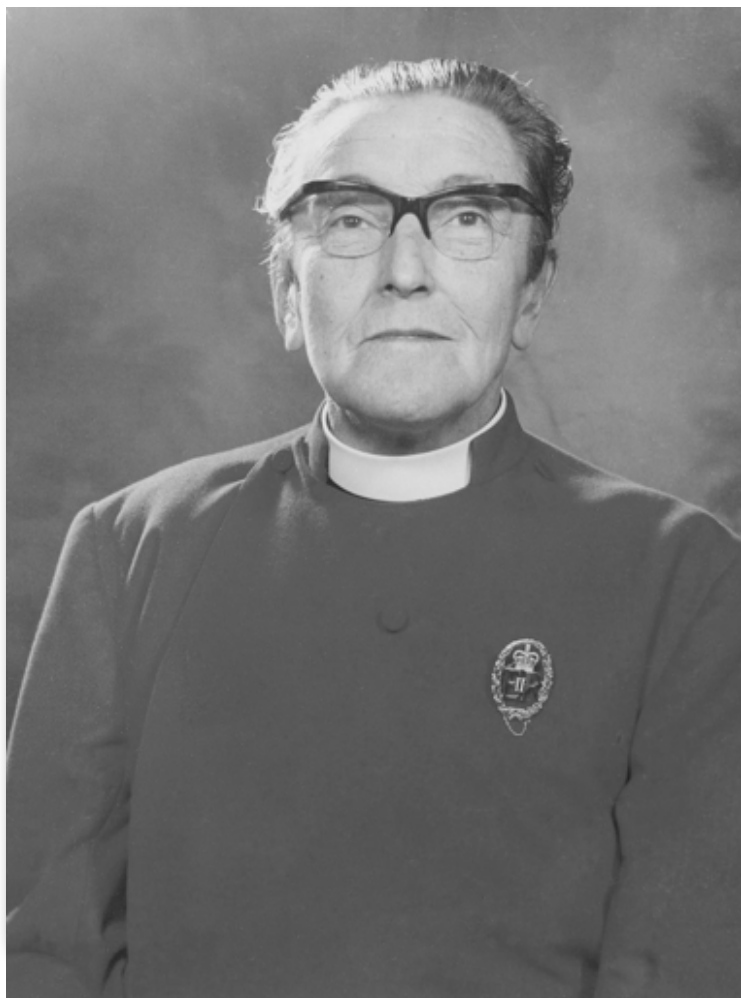


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

Top right: Leslie and Effie Badham with their children David, Christine, Clare and Paul in 1963

Middle: Leslie Badham with Queen Elizabeth at Windsor Parish Church in 1965

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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