

CHAPTER 10
THE TEST OF INTIMATE INQUIRY



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

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CHAPTER TEN

The Test of Intimate Inquiry

There is something unique, continuing, self-vindicating, in the Christian experience itself.

Professor Grensted

It is probably already becoming apparent to us that the more closely the life of Jesus is considered, the deeper one senses the greatness of it, and the higher one reaches for terms in which to describe it.

But a moment's reflection will remind us that this point in itself is suggestive. It is an unhappy fact of experience that the majority of human beings pale off a little on closer acquaintance. More intimate knowledge of their character and idiosyncrasies may not mean heightened admiration.

Nor, indeed, are the great ones of the earth always better for closer knowledge. Press agency reports may leave nothing to be desired, but behind the facade of outer appearance, within the circle of intimacy, how hard to miss the human weakness, the edges of limitation. The sad business of 'debunking' thrives on the uncharitable disclosures of those in the inner circle who claim to know 'the real man or

woman'. The incorrigible cynicism of the world would have us believe that to keep one's heroes one must keep them at arm's length.

With Jesus, however, the contrary is true—the fuller the knowledge, the more penetrating the study, the greater is likely to be our homage and devotion.

This was the case with those who were privileged to know the historic Jesus. They found discipleship an increasingly uplifting experience. Simply to share his company, men and women gladly embraced lives of hardship and sacrifice. Matthew gave up that most retaining of callings, the civil service, Peter and Andrew, James and John, abandoned their fishing smacks. Mary forsook Magdala, women like Salome and Mary Cleopas broke up their homes and, with their sons and breadwinners, faced a perilous future, and, humanly speaking, what had they to gain? Jesus was frankly realistic. He gave them clear warning that the same brutal things might happen to them as he foresaw might happen to him.

We must needs see how supremely great must have been the personality that drew out such devotion, how surpassingly rewarding must have been the near view of his personality and ministry.

But were they just simply folk, readily impressed by a fascinating and charismatic personality? Why, then, do we catch glimpses of men of the ruling class like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, members of Herod's household, and a woman like Claudia Procula, grand-daughter of Caesar Augustus, among his followers?

Let us keep the historical perspective. In his earthly ministry Jesus 'chose twelve that they might be with him', and with him on every possible occasion, and, as far as we can ascertain, these, and the women who accompanied Jesus, were the very people who came to the sober conclusion that no human language was fit to do him honour. They bowed before him as before one who was in the very counsels of God, and who had command of seemingly limitless resources.

While those on the outer fringe of discipleship were prepared to acclaim Jesus as 'John the Baptist returned from the dead, or as one of the prophets', those who heard and watched Jesus daily were not content. They felt that the estimate was inadequate. A momentous conviction, barely expressible, grew in their hearts. They saw in him a manifestation of the power of God and the wisdom of God. They came to the stupendous conclusion that a life so exemplary and awe-inspiring was of cosmic and eternal significance. 'A zone of silence,' says B. S. Easton in *The Gospel Before the Gospel*, 'separated Him from all other men. Even in his lifetime his disciples were personal believers.'

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter, the spokesman of the Twelve, made the biggest guess in human spiritual history, saying with all the awe and wonder the identification would have for a generation familiar with the Messianic hope, 'Thou art the Messiah' (Mark 8: 29).

This heightening of conviction, following on close personal knowledge, was true of all who had any part in the three

years' ministry. Indeed, not to have shared as an eyewitness and a follower in those remarkable years was to be lacking in prestige and authority in the early Church. One finds, for example, that when a successor had to be elected to take the place of Judas, no one was counted eligible unless he had followed Jesus 'from the time of his baptism to the day of his ascension' (Acts 1: 21). Even a man as zealous and spiritually mighty as Paul laboured always under the handicap that he had not had a part in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

What must be our conclusion, therefore, about the effect of intimate knowledge of Jesus upon the first disciples? It was 'those who lived most intimately with him who stood most in mingled love and wonder in his presence, gave him the highest name they knew to express transcendent greatness, Messiah, and after his Resurrection, triumphantly and with utmost courage proclaimed him as "The Prince of Life"'.³³

The affirmations about Jesus in the Epistles and Gospels have been re-echoed in all centuries, and always most emphatically by those who have sought most earnestly, inquired most deeply, and witnessed most sacrificially.

Unfortunately, one of the oldest and most repetitive of heresies is that the fundamental beliefs of Christianity disintegrate under the impact of vigorous thinking or probing research. But the contrary is most generally true.

Granted that Jesus has been loved and worshipped as Lord and Saviour by unnumbered multitudes of believers who have neither been able to understand subtleties of doctrine,

³³ Dr. H. E. Fosdick, *The Man from Nazareth*, p. 187.

nor cared for the credal formulations of the great Councils. Yet always there has been a minority—and those vitally influential—whose faith has been grounded on reason, and these have been the ones who have looked most searchingly at the documents, most steadily at the Gospel portrait.

Consider the verdict of one of our soundest theologians: ‘The more critical our study of the New Testament,’ said Dr C. H. Dodd, ‘the more sure we become that here is a real person in history challenging us all by a unique outlook on life. We discover that Christ is in some way identical with that inner light, that indwelling spirit, or whatever it is, that we live by at our best.’

Even honest doubt has been to many people a blessing in disguise, for it has stimulated a deeper inquiry, and that inquiry, like fire tempering steel, has produced a quality of conviction that the less thoughtful have never known.

Dr John Mott was a source of strength to great numbers. But it was the result of strenuous wrestling with doubt, and all the more worthwhile for the encounter. ‘I gave myself,’ he says, ‘to hard honest study of the original documents of the faith, and I shall never forget the moment when, with my notes spread out on the desk and on the faded red carpet, I was able, like Thomas, to say, “My Lord and my God”.’

Such was the result of intimate inquiry in the life of the man who made an unequalled contribution to the spiritual life of the youth of the world through the Student Christian Movement. If testimony is anything to go by, there is a slick and easy way of arriving at spiritual experience, but there are surer ways, and one of them is certainly through thought

and study that brings our better self to consciousness, and allows the Holy Spirit to speak. 'It has certainly been my experience,' writes Profesor H. D. Lewis in *We Believe in God*, 'to have arrived at great certainty in proportion to my thought about the Faith, and I am profoundly concerned to give a true impression to others of what may be gained in this way.'

Another sure road to Christian experience seems along the road of self-denying ministry to human need, for as a right faith results in service, so a life of service seems to result in faith. People feel called, even counted on, until they echo Theresa's famous words, 'Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today,' or come to realise like Albert Schweitzer in the steaming primeval jungle that we minister to sickness and disease in a higher name than our own. 'He puts us to the tasks which He has to carry out in our age. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through to His Fellowship, and, as in an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.'

But how can the validity of such personal conclusions be established? How far does wishful thinking or self-deception play a part in the phenomenon of 'Christian experience'?

Such questions may be answered along two lines of reasoning. First, what abler test of any truth have we than that people of probity and high intelligence and spirituality have testified to it? And, secondly, is it not true that evidence which may be called subjective when it comes in the shape of an isolated individual's experience takes on an

objective value when a vast number of corresponding experiences, and a weight of unanimous testimony, confirms it?

If this is the case then, how impressive is the evidence for the Christian view of Christ! What high experience has been more general, more common to all sorts and conditions, than the inner response to the divine in Christ! Moreover, how varied are the ways in which people have been led to make it! Let us glance at a few.

Some, as we have seen, have come, like the disciples of old, drawn irresistibly by 'the light of the glory of God in his face'. Others have come by way of the intellect, head first. To them, Christianity is life's noblest hypothesis. Others have come by way of mysticism and to them Jesus intuitively appeals. Others, again, have come with broken lives, and to them the Gospel is restoration and revived incentive. Others, again, have felt that call of the social Gospel. They have heard Christ's summons to practical tasks. But such clear-cut divisions are arbitrary and unreal, for in practice several roads may be used by the pilgrim, and the call 'Follow thou me' has many accents.

This is the explanation why individual experiences are not readily communicable—as Crean said to Shackleton in the polar wastes of South Georgia—there is a feeling of 'the dearth of human language, the roughness of human speech'. There is naturally a shrinkage too, from any form of claim or hint of exhibitionism, in referring to the deepest and most intimate thing in life.

However, some are willing to testify on the basis of their own experience. For example, Lord Hailsham declared at Coventry Cathedral:

I am left with the necessity of an avowal of my own faith, with the inevitable consequence that you will note my inability to live up to it, rather than the strength which it has given me. For more than thirty years, Christ has been the light of my life. Many times have I betrayed, neglected, denied the light. But never has the light deserted or betrayed me. Of course I think of Christ as an historical character born and died two thousand years ago. Of course I look for guidance and knowledge about him in the Gospels, in the historical context of the ancient world, in the tradition of the Christian community. But more and more I have come to realise that this is not the essence of what I mean when I say, I believe in Christ. I think of him as alive. I think of him as here and present, as now, as within, and not outside the field of my own consciousness, and not as remote in time and space.

It may be argued that if you have not the gift of faith, there the matter ends, and nothing can give it to you. You must go on without even an opinion about it. This is a world where the blind do not judge art, nor the deaf adjudicate on music, and where the gift of faith must be estimated by those who have the necessary sensibilities.

Is there then something rare, reserved for the few, and from others barred, about Christian experience? Hardly so, for there is no discernible religious 'type'. People of all types, and of all walks of life and age-groups, were among the first disciples, and very varied have been the multitude who have

followed them in every generation—peasant girls like Bernadette of Lourdes, heroines like Nurse Cavell, evangelists like Catherine Booth, tinkers like Bunyan, schoolmasters like William Carey, young athletes like the Studd brothers, priest- scientists like Teilhard de Chardin, priests who have stood in the last ditch with their fellow-men like Studdert Kennedy, and sophisticated intellectuals like Dag Hammarskjöld.

If it is the aim of the scientific mind to include the whole of the observable, then widely observable are the lives and endeavours of those who have, in one way or another, undertaken an intimate inquiry into the meanings of Christianity.

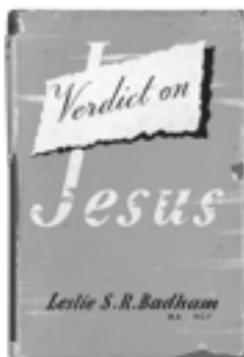
Their experience, with a unanimity that proclaims its genuineness, is made articulate in their lives, in the devotional writings and hymns of the Christian centuries, in the affirmations and insights of the saints, in the earnestness of preaching, and in the clear witness of the world-wide Church.

It is, indeed, hard to believe that from the dross of illusion there could come such an amount of testimony, that, after all sifting and allowance have been made, leaves a deposit that demands recognition as gold.

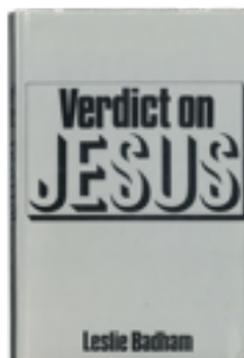
We do not aim at enlarging further on so great a matter, save to say that the point is established that intimate inquiry into Christianity tends to result in personal awareness of the divine in Christ, so that millions who have undertaken it have ventured on his promises, rejoiced in him as Saviour, and have looked beyond the veil to see his face.

7 Decades

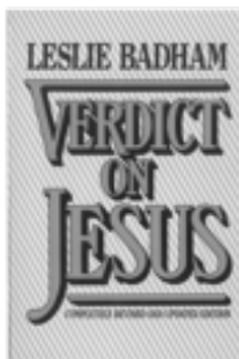
Verdict on Jesus through the years



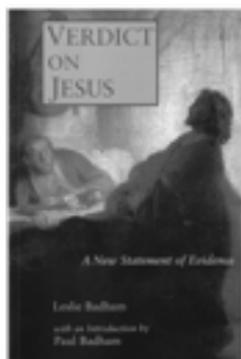
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

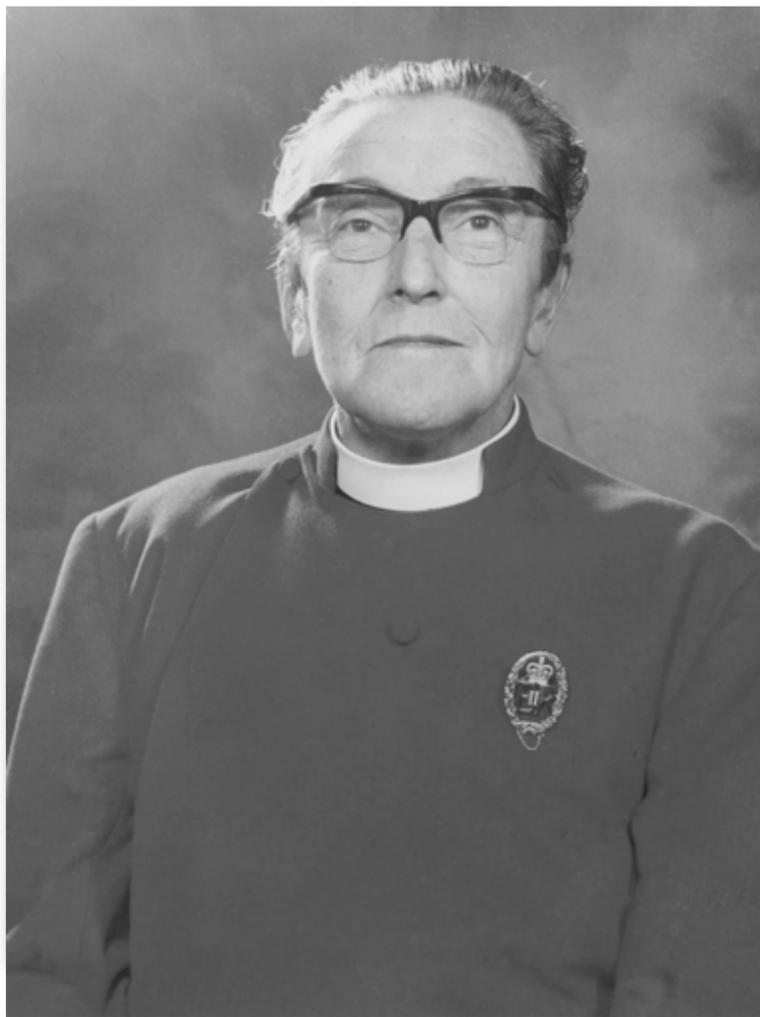


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

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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