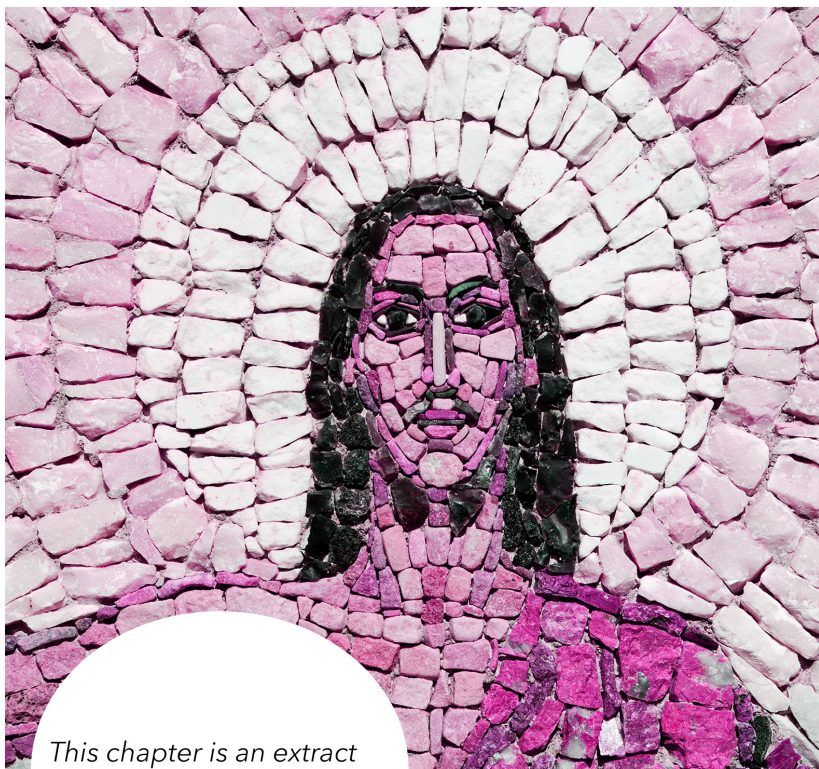


CHAPTER 2
THE TEST OF CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

LESLIE BADHAM WITH PAUL BADHAM

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CHAPTER TWO

The Test of Contemporary Importance

There are many who have scarcely made contact at all with Jesus of Nazareth. In so far as he has been presented to them, he has seemed irrelevant. We therefore suggest a direct approach.

If one has no religion as such, if he has closed his mind to all thoughts of the supernatural, if he regards the Churches as purveyors of outworn myths, there is still a place where Jesus may grip his attention. He stimulates curiosity.

Curiosity is a basic instinct, and agnostic as one may feel to be, one may still wish to know what has made Jesus the world's most unaccountable man. The answer is readily available in the world's most accessible book—the New Testament.

In a world teeming with the ordinary, here is one who has unquestionably made an extraordinary impact. He is unusual from practically any angle we look at him.

He has a mind that cannot be pigeon-holed, and a view of life that raises a question-mark over most current values and attitudes. As powerful opposing ideologies make their goals

more apparent, the relevance of what he taught and stood for challenges contemporary thought.

If we could imagine him taking part in a television programme what an experience it would be! Any subject referred to him would at once be lifted to a new level. His replies would be incisive, and memorable, and be dealt with on a scale that would throw light on other subjects not then in view. The way he would acquit himself is not conjecture, for the Gospels are strewn with instances of the power and quality of his thinking, and the way cleverly framed questions got unanswerable replies. St Matthew (22: 15–46) shows how he freely exposed himself to public questioning, and the way he enlarged people's thinking.

The Pharisees and Herodians, for example, arrived together with a trap question about paying tribute to Caesar. We read 'the answer took them by surprise. They went away and left him alone.' The Sadducees came next with a question about the reality of any life beyond this. The Sadducees had no belief in it. But his answer 'silenced them, but the people heard what he said and were astounded at his teaching.' Meanwhile the Pharisees had met to think up another question. It was on the matter of the greatest commandment in the Mosaic Law. Jesus combined two separate statements from that Law in a masterly reply that left no more to be said. He himself then asked them a question, to which 'Not a man could say a word in reply, and they shrank away from asking him any more questions.'

In a world like ours then, replete with questions but short of answers, should we not too hang on his word, for he could deal in the same breath with the particular and universal,

the topical and the timeless? In short the Gospel statement, 'Never man spoke like this man,' is not so much a compliment, as a coolly discerning verdict.

On street corners Jesus met the questioners of his day, but he was never the mouthpiece of street-corner wisdom and repartee. Always he seemed to move from some passing incident to the disclosure of some truth that has only to be pondered to be found probing and profound.

The stories he told are among the world's literary masterpieces. Striking enough to catch the ear of the passer-by, they made his hearers realise the unexplained depths in him. Interesting enough at one level to win the attention in a Galilean market place, they live on to challenge the moral and spiritual perception of those who have been the lights and leaders of successive generations.

To speak in parable, to illustrate truth on one plane by an illustration drawn from another plane is a difficult business. Felicitous illustrations, as every speaker knows, are usually the result of careful premeditation and anxious craftsmanship. But they sprang readily to the lips of Jesus, and they had the effectiveness of immediate appeal, and yet a relevance for all, always and everywhere.

The reception of most sermons in our time reminds us that things were dramatically different when Jesus preached. 'The common people heard him gladly ... there was no room even about the doors ... crowds followed him on foot out of the cities and villages.'

‘They were astonished,’ says the record, ‘for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the professional teachers.’ As Jesus spoke people saw life taking new shape and meaning around great central truths. The ‘authority’ was that which people long to find, the authority that truth exercises over the mind, moral law over the conscience, spiritual insight over the soul.

Here then is the contemporary importance of Jesus. He said the highest things, and he said them with an authority that gives them finality.

Honest thinking that penetrates to any depth still takes us right in to the matters he talked about. Problem after problem today could be met by his answers. Economic justice, racial relationships, resorts to violence, and violence in its most tragic form—war—all show how far his thinking remains ahead of us. The facts of life call us to examine his teaching, freshly, objectively, as a pressing contemporary need.

It is plain that his parables deal with what we call ‘situation ethics’, drawn from the experience of life itself.

When the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ for instance, was brought to Jesus, he did not discuss it in a lawyer’s way, citing current practice, levels of involvement and obligation.

He personifies the issue of the story of the Good Samaritan. He presents the situation of a man robbed, beaten up, left to die, and vividly contrasts a priest and Levite’s utter detachment and indifference, with a Samaritan’s readiness to be involved, to bind up the man’s wounds, and make

himself responsible for his care and rehabilitation. The appeal is direct to every one's conscience. If you would be a neighbour: 'Go and do the same.'

The story flows, as a good story should, as smooth as silk. But it is shot-silk with strong colours in it. The one who told the story is a Jew, the hero is a Samaritan. Neighbourliness rises above racial prejudices. Again, we know the race of the Samaritan, priest, and Levite. But of what race is the battered victim? We are not told. Social justice is not a matter of race, but of sheer human need.

The 'neighbour' problem faces our age. We face it in a world where collectivism is on top. But personal conscience, individual responsibility, cannot be ignored. Collective indifference is individual indifference writ large. The situation is brought home to us again in the parable of a man of affluence absorbed in his own selfish indulgence, while a man he should have neighbored dies destitute, starving, and with suppurating sores, at his gates.

Is life an entrustment? Is there moral accountability? Jesus taught it. To every individual the eventual and inexorable word is spoken, 'This night your soul is required of you.' Nor do we escape judgment here. How long can human society stand the tensions building up within it? Are the problems of social and racial justice to be solved volitionally, or compulsorily? Is freewill or force to decide the issues?

Many minds are stuck with the idea that the ethics of Jesus are perfectionist idealism, unsuited to this tough world. But the attitude of those who invert his teaching are the real problem, for we have come to the stage where the fortunes

and fate of humankind are indivisible, 'We are members one of another.' None is safe unless all are safe. We need to hear the Gospel's ringing announcement, 'One is your Master, and you are brothers in the one great family of man,' and then to heed the ethic that alone can help us to meet the intolerable intimacy of proximity without community.

Is the ethic of 'everyone for him or herself abreast of the times? Or the barbarous creed that 'they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can'? Shortly before he was shot at Memphis, Dr Martin Luther King, the civil rights leader, posed what could be the choice before humankind in the near future: 'A world at peace or a world in pieces. Non-violence or non-existence.' This great man, like Gandhi in India before him, saw the urgent relevance to modern need of the saving ethic of Jesus, where sane discussion based on the moral law replaces violence and the outworn creed that might is right.

Does the ethical teaching of Jesus show a more realistic appraisal of the choice facing humankind today than we have been realising? Consider the solution he offered to the problem of evil and violence in the Sermon on the Mount; and in the determined teaching that evil should be overcome by good which he held to even on the cross.

What do you do when violence marches against you? It is a highly contemporary question when the trend towards attaining rights, real or imaginary, by force of one kind or another, is upon us.

The law of Moses put resistance, or reprisal, in terms of tit for tat. 'Life for life, an eye for an eye, wound for wound,

stripe for stripe' (Ex. 21: 23–25). But Jesus brought new thinking to an old problem. He had watched people meeting evil with evil, force with force, and he saw the endlessness and viciousness of the proceedings. In a brief question he exposed its inadequacy, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' How can you ever deal with any form of evil by matching it with equivalent evil? Somehow the vicious circle of evil answering evil had to be broken.

Jesus grounded his solution on the character of a God who was big enough to allow his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and the rain to fall impartially upon the just and unjust. Jesus counselled a new integrity. Be decent, ran his teaching, whether others are decent or not. Never let your own idea of what is ultimately right, be deflected by another's conduct. Be just in the face of injustice, bless even if cursed, love even if hated. Live life in terms of undiscourageable goodwill. In Simone Weil's splendid sentence, 'Never react to evil in a way that augments it.'

Has such a challenging ethic any place in a modern society reaching towards maturity? Is it a slice of realism? What does society gain by cynicism answering cynicism? What shall it profit a world if atomic bomb answers atomic bomb? Is this a viable solution to the problems of anarchy and war? Or is Jesus counselling a passivity that would result in evil striding ruthlessly on? But Jesus undergirds his bold ethic with a philosophy able to sustain it. He held out no promise that violence could be either checked or matched by a dispersed benevolence. He envisaged powerful unifications of humankind under the majesty of the moral law and that, in turn, supported by a common belief in the Fatherhood of God.

No age has fully realised the tremendous challenge such a teaching carries to the power structures on other lines that threaten humankind. But every step towards understanding and goodwill, towards justice in terms of moral rights, and towards the spread of faith, is a step towards that universal humanity which Christ proclaimed.

Profound motives of personal and public need call for a new scrutiny of the guidelines afforded by such teaching.

Jesus in his own person is a perennial challenge to thought. Ordinary portraiture has not coped with him. He expands the very stature of humanity. If there is truth in Plato's words that 'the noblest of all studies is what a man is, and how he should live,' then the personality of this man calls for fresh appraisal. He unites in his own life a number of qualities that in other lives seem wide apart. We find idealism and realism, humility and majesty, gaiety and gravity, love and justice. All of which are strange combinations. He united in his own life a granite-like strength with a disposition that attracted playful children. Powerful personalities in Church and State ceased to be powerful in his company, while we see in contrast, that ordinary people chose homelessness and persecution simply to be with him. He exhibits qualities of poise and balance that elsewhere we shall seek in vain to match.

A recent book carries a phrase 'living with mystery' which aptly describes humanity's situation. 'What is bad, what is good?' asks Pierre in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. 'What should one love, what hate? What should one live for? What am I? What is life, what is death? What Power governs all?' These

are everyone's questions. Since, liking it or not, we have to 'live with mystery', can we be indifferent to the replies that hitherto have been accepted as being most worthy of belief?

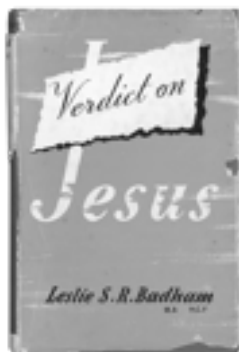
Such questions as Pierre's obviously demand an answer in terms of religious faith, 'believing where we cannot know'. They carry our gaze from the foreground of life to make us search for a spiritual background. Is this a universe blind to moral values? Is there an innate sense of right and wrong that corresponds to something ultimate? Is life a cul-de-sac ending in extinction? Are humans accidental intruders into a universe that never purposed them? Is there a Power that governs all that corresponds to the God that Jesus claimed to know and reveal? Life cannot be separated from such questioning, unless we are content to separate life from thought.

Here is not only the contemporary, but the timeless importance of Jesus. He claimed to reveal Reality, to put us in touch with the very Ground of all Being. In so far as such claims commend themselves to us, so we will not be averse to hearing what may be said for them.

The aim of this chapter, you remember, was primarily to stimulate interest. We have been scratching the surface in an initial inquiry. To go further may bring into fuller focus the most astonishing figure who has ever arrested the attention of humankind. More than we ever thought possible, we may find he is not in fact a man of the past at all, but our Contemporary.

7 Decades

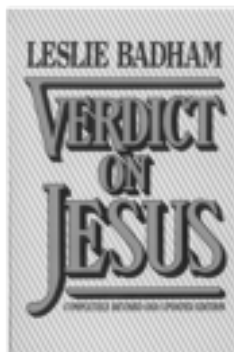
Verdict on Jesus through the years



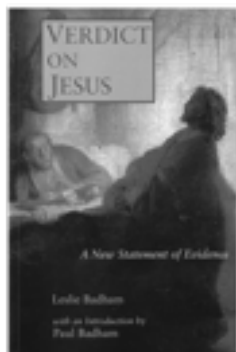
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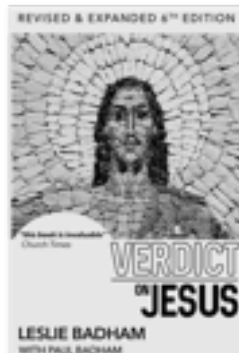
1983



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Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

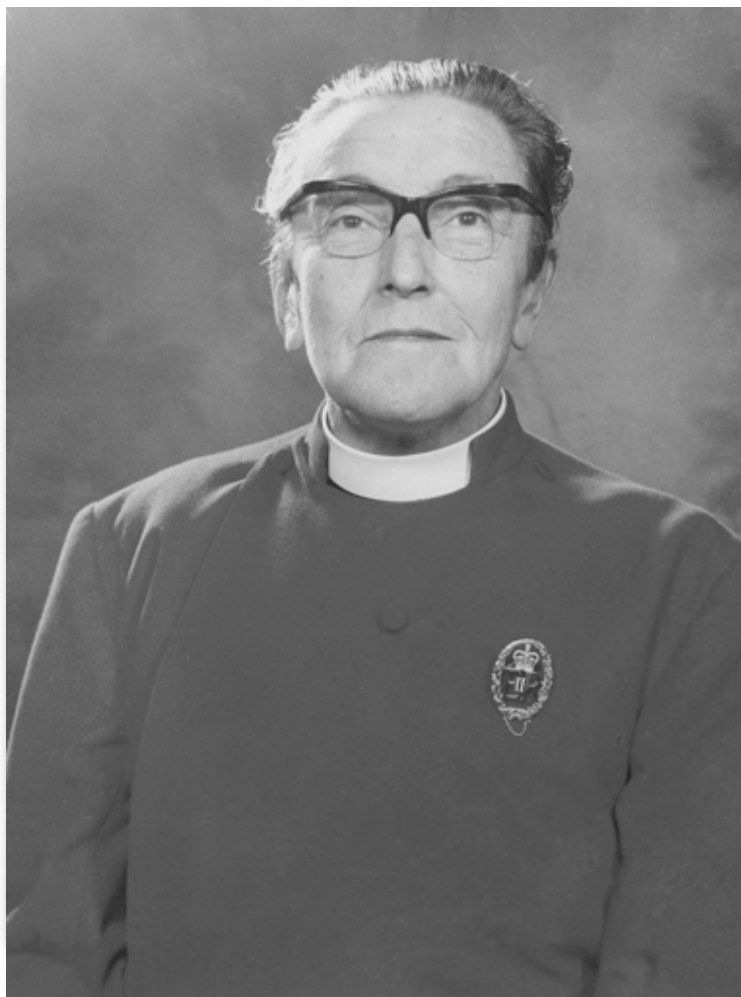


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

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

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

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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