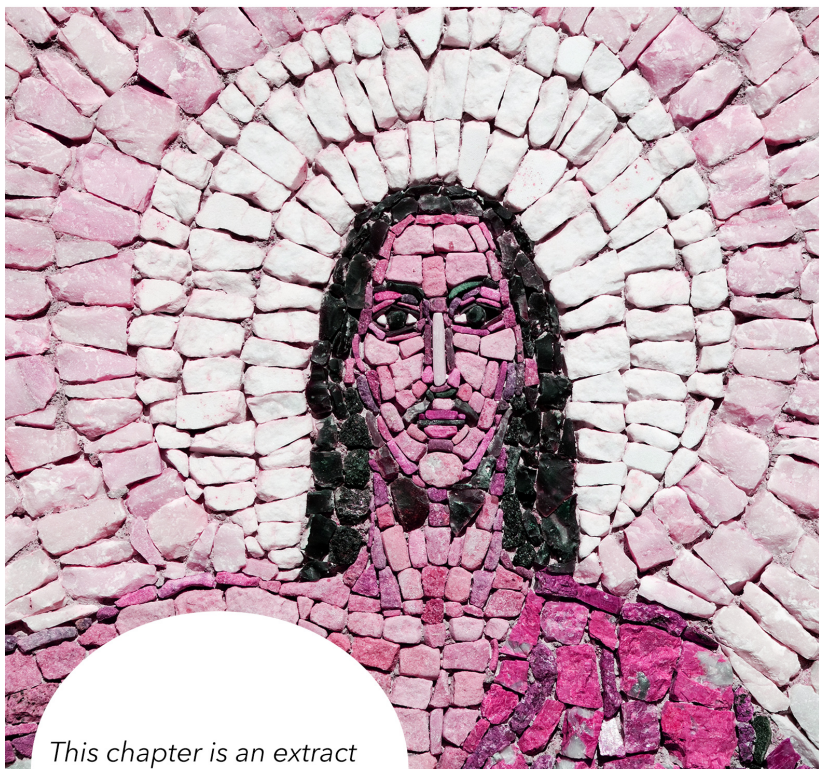


CHAPTER 3  
**THE TEST OF DURABILITY**



*This chapter is an extract  
from the 6th edition of*

**VERDICT**  

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**ON JESUS**

**LESLIE BADHAM WITH PAUL BADHAM**

## About this Extract

This is an extract from the 6th edition of Verdict on Jesus.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Test of Durability*

An historian was asked: 'What single individual has left the most permanent impression on the world?' He at once named Jesus of Nazareth. 'It is interesting and significant,' he said, 'that an historian like myself, with no theological bias whatever, cannot portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving him foremost place.'<sup>11</sup>

In our last chapter we considered how relevant could be the solutions of this most significant man to some of the problems of today. But is it not startling to find one single individual so important? The date on the morning's paper shows how far humanity has come from his historic life.

Mohammed's flight to Medina sets the date by which the prophet's followers count time, but for the West, everything is dated from the time when Jesus was born, 'Nothing,' said Dr W. R. Matthews, 'has been the same since.' 'Life's but a walking shadow,' said Shakespeare, 'a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.' That holds true of the overwhelming majority. They

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<sup>11</sup> H. G. Wells, author of *A Short History of the World*, 1940

cross the stage of life, and then get cried off, or clapped off, and then forgotten.

A pathetic few fare better. Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon—they raised such a dust with their trampling armies that even yet the dust has not settled and hid their names. A few, like the Pharaohs, left monuments too big for the sands of time to cover, and a handful of choicer spirits linger in memory because of writings which remain like landmarks on the plains of thought. But these are exceptional. How few of all the computed millions of people now living will be remembered when the hearts that love them are still?

Jesus, of course, raised no army, left no monument, wrote no book, yet after two thousand years more people are interested in, familiar with, and influenced by, his life and teaching than by the career and writings of any other person alive or dead. Some may feel he has had more than his share of the world's time, but plainly others have not thought so.

Does such an enduring influence call for an explanation? At the very beginning of the Christian movement, the astonishing possibility was raised that in the course of time the durability of Jesus' influence might call for an explanation and at the highest level.

The occasion was when the success of the apostles' preaching alarmed the Senate of Israel, and one of their number, Gamaliel, a respected doctor of law, advised them to give it time. We have recently had a couple of popular movements, he said in effect, that have proved no more than a nine days' wonder. Leave these people alone. If this movement is of human origin, it will break up of its own

accord. 'But,' he added, 'if this movement is of God you cannot stop it. You may actually find yourselves opposing God' (Acts 5: 38, 39).

Gamaliel may have known more than he was declaring, and was being cautious. In any case, is any test more demanding than durability?

Now, it is a striking thing that every fact about Christ gains, rather than loses, importance, the more it is considered. The permanence of his influence, for example, becomes still more amazing the more it is scrutinised.

An influence once given continues to exert itself. That is more true of Christ's influence than of any other. Normally, and for the generality of all, personal influence moves out from the individual to society in ever widening, and ever weakening, waves of power, until it is nothing more than an obscure undercurrent beneath society's thought and life. Naturally its relative durability depends on the strength of the original impulses, but as the wake of a vessel gets lost in the ocean, so there are few whose influence is not swiftly absorbed, and whose thoughts are not speedily assimilated and surpassed.

The influence of Jesus, however, has retained a perennial freshness and strength. It need not detain us here to examine what Christians believe to be the cause of that peculiar vitality. Rationalise it as we will, it is plain to see that the power of Christ has not diminished with the years, nor in fact does the weight of his impact, and the quality of his influence, bear any relationship to chronology at all.

If it is true that none of us can do more than lay their fullest capacities at the feet of their leader, then it is plain to see that Jesus has been as meaningful to General Booth as he was to St Bernard, as loved by Frances of Assisi as he was by the martyr Polycarp, as much a source of inspiration to C. S. Lewis as to John Bunyan, as central to the preaching of Billy Graham as to John Wesley.

This is not to say that people of such different types and backgrounds have found in Jesus precisely the same thing, still less that their wording of a great matter would be the same. The Christ of Mother Theresa may not be the Christ of John Donne, nor the Christ of Bernadette of Lourdes the Christ of a young Salvationist in London; the prayers of the ASB revisers are not those of Cranmer or Laud, but they would all agree with what Bonhoeffer wrote a few months before his death, 'All that we rightly expect from God and pray for is to be found in Jesus Christ.'

Each generation, and probably each human type, finds something personal in their relationship with Jesus, but all would join Peter in naming him 'the Prince of life'.

This repetition of Christian experience, this continuity of faith, explains why there have arisen from time to time burning souls who have recreated for their generation a sense of Pentecost. This explains the continual resurgence of the historic movement we call Christianity, and the number of times that the spirit of Christ has arisen, phoenix-like, from what seemed only the grey ashes of its former heat.

But let us anticipate an objection. Is it the Church—the visible extension of Christ's influence—which is responsible

for this? Is it the movement that gives life to the founder, or the founder who gives life to the movement? At first sight the former seems the likeliest theory, but history disproves it.

Time and again, as a meteor for a moment brightens the sky and then falls back into the darkness, it has seemed probable that Christianity would share the mortality of other movements. But every decline has been answered by an unexpected resurgence of power, and every time that power has been attributable to a fresh hold on the original teaching of Jesus and a fresh consciousness of what is called 'his presence' in the Church.

Christianity was born in the Roman Empire, but it did not die with it. It drew to itself the best elements in the old culture, husbanded them, and lived on. The Dark Ages came, but the light of the Gospel was not extinguished. Islam rolled forward and it seemed unlikely that Christianity would survive its impact, but it did. Feudalism and Christianity were so interlocked that the failure of the one would seem inevitably to involve the other, but Christianity disentangled itself from feudalism and lived on. Before the many-coloured lights of the Renaissance one might have thought Christianity would have paled and died. But, contrary to expectations, the new learning lent it a wider background.

In most ages there have been some ready to write its epitaph. Celsus, for instance, did it in the early days, only to stir Christians to deeper thought. In 1736 Bishop Butler wrote his *Analogy of Religion*, directing it to those who 'regarded the faith not so much a subject for inquiry, as at length discovered to be fictitious'. How could they know that

three years later John Wesley was to start preaching, that the Methodist and Evangelical Revivals were just round the corner, with the Oxford Movement to follow? On the Continent Voltaire declared that Christianity had only a few years to run. How could he foresee that his own spacious home was to be bought as a depot for the Bible Society?

Gloomy verdicts have increased since World War II, but even in the Soviet Union prolonged and calculated oppression has not killed the faith, and from the ablest Church historian of the twentieth century have come books called *The Unquenchable Light* and *Advance through Storm*. 'Twenty centuries of world history,' wrote Latourette, 'have confirmed in startling fashion, Christ's promise that the gates of hell should not prevail against his church.'<sup>12</sup>

These seem brave words. There are evidences of a hardening of human nature, and of a widespread indifference to Christian influence, and a powerful humanist dispute of its truth. The Church flags and fails in areas where once it was confident and strong. A shrewd observer, Quintin Hogg, observed at Coventry in 1970, 'What is at stake today is not religious orthodoxy or traditional piety, but the continued existence of Christianity and its influence on humankind.'

Is Christianity, then, like a leaky ship going to sink lower and lower in the water until it takes its final plunge? There are times when one might think so were it not for the philosophy that comes from a long view and we can see how time and again it has recovered confidence and found renewal.

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<sup>12</sup> Prof. K. S. Latourette, *The Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. VI



There may be a salutary lesson in the present situation. When the German theologian Bonhoeffer was in prison awaiting death, he set down his reason for the weakness of the German Church as he was seeing it: 'Ecclesiastical interests well to the fore, but little interest in Christ. Jesus disappearing from view.' The same thing has been widely true of the Church generally. Everywhere the Church has been preoccupied with interests vastly less important than her proclamation of Christ to the world.

There are signs that a change is coming, and the reaffirmation that Jesus is not only the starting point of a viable faith, but as Teilhard de Chardin put it in *Hymn of the Universe*, 'the centre towards which all things move.'

After this excursion of thought we look again at the central figure of the Gospels, and ask what can be the secret of his continually renewed influence? He certainly makes no bid for easy popularity. At no time does he scale his teaching to flatter human weakness, or to countenance established prejudices. He demands life at new levels of genuineness, courage, purity, generosity, love, and faith. Those who accept his leadership must be prepared, like Saul on the road to Damascus, to remake the foundation of their lives.

Humility is as difficult to wear as a hair shirt, but Jesus puts it on his list of priorities. Forgiveness is so hard a virtue that few other religions mention it, but Jesus exalts it, and makes our own standing in God's sight depend on our willingness to exhibit it. Self-interest and self-indulgence have a freehold on most lives; who can evict them from their tenancy in the heart? But Jesus makes hard living a

condition of discipleship, and only counts life well lived if it is spent in the service of others. Further, the road grows hard beneath our feet as we realise that he means by 'others' the very people whom we, with our limited sympathies, like to forget. Purity of motive, even in the best of people, is extraordinarily hard to achieve, but Jesus is interested in the corners of the heart. There is no escape from his insight.

And what shall we say about his call to forsake all and follow him, or about his repeated warning that the life of the wayfaring Christian should be shadowed by a cross? Recollect the terrible words in which he spoke of the cost of active discipleship, 'Whosoever follows me must be prepared to shoulder the gallows beam' (Mark 8: 34).

How was it, then, that ideas so uncongenial to much in human nature, and frequently so alien to much in the cultures they invaded, have been able to endure?

Plainly, if we are inclined to ascribe the durability of Christ's influence to the ease and magnetism of his programme, it is well to be reminded that he carried with him a lot of ideas which no ordinary person will consider magnetic at all, but disturbingly searching, difficult and revolutionary. His hold on the centuries is not explained by any supposed ease or lightness in his challenge.

What then explains it? Why have people, to their own condemnation, retained the memory of a life that so vividly contrasts with their own? Why have they acknowledged as authoritative, ideals that have so demonstrably proved themselves to be beyond human reach? One could say with Wordsworth that it is 'man's most noble attribute'

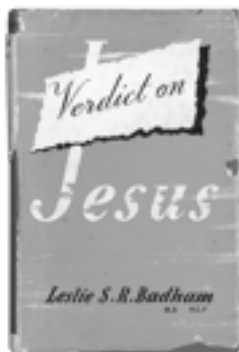
*To wish for something loftier . . . more adorned Than is the daily garb of human life.*

But such suggestions merely touch the fringe of the matter. Christ has not retained his hold because of the excellence of the moral code he brought to life. People have accepted his authority because they have believed him to be the revealer of the invisible God. The truth or falsity of such an amazing belief we shall be considering later. For the moment, we merely set it down, as a matter of fact, that the persistence of Christ's moral influence has been entirely due to the persistence of the theological beliefs held about him. It is the compulsion of those beliefs, and the assurance of the spiritual order that they imply, that has moved people to accept, and strain towards, the Christian virtues. The very difficulty of those virtues indicates how sure people have been about the supernatural authority of Jesus. No one uncertain about that authority would have ever attempted to stumble after such a demanding leader.

As we move forward now to another aspect of our subject, it may be well to recall some words that despite their strange audacity continue to challenge the future, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall never pass away.'

## 7 Decades

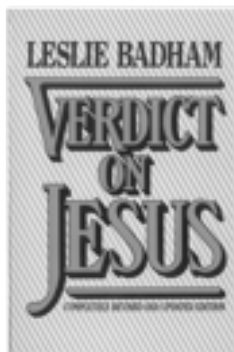
### *Verdict on Jesus through the years*



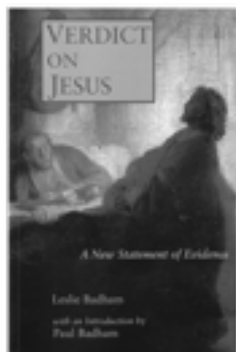
1950



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1983



1995



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# Leslie Badham

*Author of Verdict on Jesus*

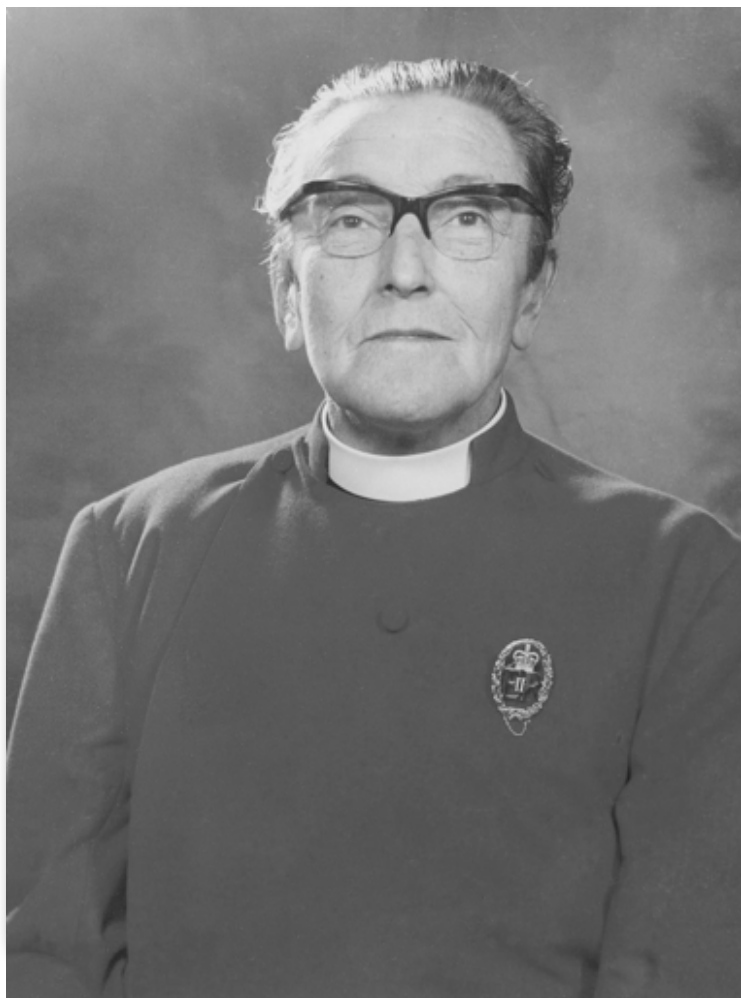


**Top left:** Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

**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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