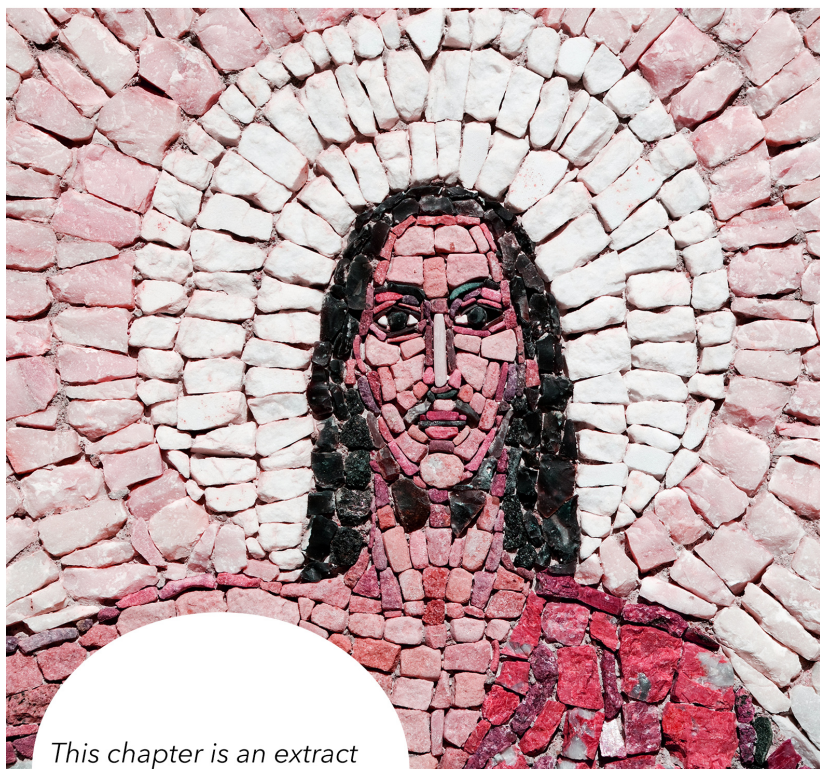


CHAPTER 5  
**THE TEST OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING**



*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 FIVE

### *The Test of Human Understanding*

We have seen something of the significance of Jesus for our time. We have observed his hold on the centuries and noted how his influence has broadened out over the world.

It will be seen, too, that in no sense are we building up a case for Christ, any more than an historian builds up a case for the history he has to set down, or a geologist builds up a case for the strata that crops out before him. Facts and observable phenomena are being dealt with. We, too, in our study of Jesus are seeking to be objective, to be concerned not with creation but with observation, not with the adding to facts, but with the adding up of facts. We are recording observable truths.

We now move forward to inquire how it has been possible for Christianity to break through the dual frontiers of time and space. How has it been possible to transmit a basic Christianity to people of widely differing ages, races, mental level, and moral and spiritual apprehension? What is there in it that has awoken response in such varying hearts and heads? What accounts for it being capable of universal application?

Part of the answer is to be found in the way that Jesus presented his teaching. He clothed his thoughts in terms that made their world-wide diffusion a practical proposition.

‘Most of our mental operations are inseparable from images or are produced by images. It is difficult to express thought clearly without images,’ says Ernest Dimnet in *The Art of Thinking*. Recall, then, how the parables of Jesus fill the gallery of the mind with telling portraiture, how the moral lesson is animated and made graphic by human instances.

Morality in terms of abstract theory has a cold and limited interest. But Jesus made it vivid by showing it in action in people’s lives. He sets the moral complacency of the Pharisee in contrast to the anguished penitence of the sinful tax-collector (Luke 18: 10); the unfeeling self-sufficiency of Dives against the pathetic needs of Lazarus (Luke 16: 19); the religious formalism of priest and Levite in contrast to the practical neighbourliness of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30). He shows what the high-call can mean to a spiritual dilettante like the Rich Young Ruler (Matt. 19: 16) or to a morally earnest civil servant like Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 8).

Such images make their home in people’s minds. They are transmissible from age to age, and from land to land.

Now ethics and theology, formally expressed, can be codified, and hardened into systems. Jesus has seen this happening. He had noted the people of his time keeping the letter of the Old Testament Law, and violating the whole spirit that lay behind the Law. In contrast, he cried out for living religion, for goodness springing out of the affections of

the heart, for religion that revealed the positive engagement of the mind, the spirit, and the will, with purposes of God.

But how could he prevent formalism from sterilising his own message? He would make the hardening process as difficult as possible. He would invest his teaching with an inner life of its own.

True, being as they are, people would try to systematise his teaching, formulate it in legal definitions, but in themselves his ideals and principles would contrive to be distinct from the system, bigger than the formulation. Even if the system with which they were identified crumbled, his truths would retain their vitality and even contribute, when freshly handled, to the sweeping away of the system.

How often this has happened! History has justified the manner in which Jesus gave his teaching.

With changing circumstances, textbook definitions get left behind. But Jesus avoided textbook truths. 'The words I speak to you,' he said, 'are spirit and life.' They appeal not only to the intellect but to the understanding. They are capable of meeting the human mind at different levels of apprehension and discernment.

Stopford Brooke makes this plain by drawing a helpful analogy between Christ's words and music:

*Neither you nor I can say of an air of Mozart's that it means this or that, it means one thing to me, another to you. It leaves, however, a similar impression upon us both—a sense of exquisite melody, a love of a life that is in*

*harmony with the impression received, and an affection for the one who so lifts us above ourselves. So it is with the words of Christ. The spirit receives them and each man receives them in accordance with the state of his spirit. To one, the words 'Blessed are the pure in heart' are solemn with warning, to another they are rich with comfort; to one they mean struggle, to another, peace.*<sup>15</sup>

It is plain to see that of any characteristic saying of Jesus the same thing is true. Its meaning will challenge our apprehension. Yet amazingly enough, at whatever level we apprehend it, some high message will be conveyed.

Today, across the world, it is plain that this is happening. The Gospel is being interpreted in varying environments, and being applied to different circumstances. What the Gospel means in Labrador is not what it means in Lambeth. Yet in either place the pressure is upward, and the influence tending to be unifying. That the Gospel is capable of universal application is being demonstrated.

Thus we face the flexibility and power of Christian principles, of something that is not so much a form as a spiritual force, not so much a small collection of aphorisms and parables as a creative power ever broadening out to meet growing apprehensions.

Perhaps we may suggest the Gospel's flexibility and power by a homely illustration. To mechanically minded car owners, a universal joint on a vehicle conveys a positive thrust in any desired direction. If the illustration is

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<sup>15</sup> *Christ in Modern Life*, p.4.

allowable, could we not say that the message of Christianity has a similar bearing, conveys a similar thrust to the whole of life? Without strain or torque, the words of Jesus line up with every circumstance. They have not to be strained to fit. They were delivered big enough to fit—to assimilate the best in Greek philosophy and Roman jurisprudence, and yet to remain a central force conveying power and direction to every forward movement of the human spirit.

We have now noticed some reasons that help to explain the Gospel's universal appeal and continued vitality—its easily understood imagery, its freedom from form, its release of germinal ideas, its power to assimilate, and yet to remain true to itself, but we have not mentioned its main secret—the centrality of Christ's own personality.

Psychologists have familiarised us with the way mental processes are aided by the power of associated ideas, how life can be invigorated by associations that quicken the mind, kindle the emotions, and stir the will. To the Christian, however, there is little new in this. Church teaching has long anticipated in practice what psychology has recently expounded in theory.

From the beginning, Jesus called upon people to follow him and to find in his life and example guidance and inspiration for themselves. Nor has the Church forgotten the emphasis. In all ages it has stressed what Thomas a Kempis called *The Imitation of Christ*. Its teaching has centred on the way that the Jesus' life is interwoven with the common experiences of humankind.

For the Christian, where childhood is, there, too, is the associated thought of the child at Bethlehem. Where, again, the lips of love give pledge in marriage, there is the recollection of Jesus at the marriage at Cana of Galilee. Where the day labour of workers is in the harvest field, Christians can recollect the parable of the sower, the message of the wheat and the tares, and the thought of the day when the reapers are the angels. Or when the fishing fleets come home, there is before the disciple's mental eye the boats on the sea of Galilee, the recollection of Jesus preaching from the ship, and the reminder that he is to be, like Peter, 'a fisher of men.'

Naturally, none but the Christian, whose inward eye has been opened, can appreciate the emotional power of such associations. But the charge that all this is mere sentiment, heart-talk, weakens somewhat, when we note how intimately such associations are interwoven with a moral as well as an emotional significance.

When hot blood courses in argument, Christians are likely to be reminded of the way that Jesus lifted passing issues to the cool realm of absolute truth, as in his reply to the quarrelling brother about every kind of greed. When insidious wrong has established itself, they remember how Jesus set his face against compromise. When soft-footed temptation finds Christians in a wilderness of moral uncertainty, they draw strength from the memory of Christ's inner struggle from the outset of his ministry to its close with evil, and how he

*...never sold the truth to serve the hour;  
Nor paltered with eternal God for power.*



There is moving testimony, also, of the way that the recollection of Jesus is able to fortify Christians in their own most intimate experiences. When Christians have to vigil alone, and no other heart seems to understand, there comes to his or her mind the memory of Jesus in Gethsemane, the moonlight falling on his strong, troubled face, and upon the sleeping forms of those who could not stay awake with him one hour. Or, finally, for the most poignant experiences come to everyone, where there is pain to be borne, or a dark river to be crossed, Christians turn to Calvary and to the hope that shines beyond.

Here, then, is the major reason why people in all ages and in all countries have responded to the Gospel. They have found it speaking to their condition.

The Christian Church has made the very circle of the year bring home to the believer the main doctrines of its faith. Advent brings to mind both the thought of Bethlehem and of the final coming of Christ as Judge. Christmas celebrates the divine birth, Epiphany the world-wide mission of the church, and Lent the need of self-scrutiny and self-discipline on the pattern of the forty days' sojourn in the wilderness. Holy Week recalls in detail the story of the passion, Good Friday the death on the Cross, Easter Day the immortal hope, Whit Sunday the coming of the Holy Spirit, and, finally, Trinity Sunday the wonder of God's three-fold revelation of himself to human experience.

Instructed Christians are in no danger of forgetting that they are living in a spiritual order, and that their own lives at every turn should be modelled on the one who left 'an

example that we might follow in his steps.' And this is not without significance.

'The quality of one's images,' says Ernest Dimnet, 'largely determines the quality of one's thoughts.' If this is the case, who can estimate what it has meant to the evolution of humankind to have successive generations of Christians seeking to imitate the life and attitude of one who, on any estimate, was the holiest and wisest and greatest of all.

But how shall we speak of those further matters that touch the inner core of Christian experience?

Jesus knew the limits of human speech. Like Goethe, he would have said 'the highest cannot be spoken'. We find him, therefore, appealing to the mystic and emotional side of human nature, by conveying aspects of truth through symbolic and dramatic actions. Thus we find him, for example, teaching humility, not by verbal discourse only but by supplementing word by deed. While the disciples wrangled 'as to who should be the greatest', Jesus girded himself with a towel and performed the most menial task of the Oriental household. He washed the feet of his weary and fretful followers. Or again, proclaiming the importance of children, he crowned word with unforgettable gesture, 'He took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.'

The most important of these mnemonic actions was the Last Supper. On a day, rich with past memory of the Passover, and replete with emotion for the morrow, Jesus desired to print upon the memory of his disciples the significance alike of his coming death and of his promised spiritual presence,

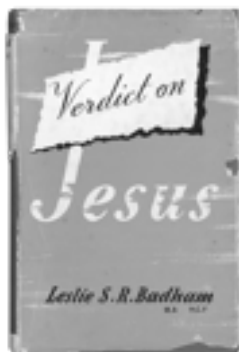
so he took bread and wine, to invest them with such sacramental meaning that, wherever the Church has gone, the central service has been a re-enactment of that historic meal, the partaking, by faith, of the Bread of Life.

It is the witness of the world-wide Church, that such symbolism has everywhere proved of the highest spiritual worth, and one marvels afresh, at the one person in history, who has been able to stand before all with a message touching the whole of their lives and reaching the entirety of their nature. Who can fathom the mystery of an influence that, like a searchlight, turns in all directions and throws light upon every human path?

It will be noted that the deeper we inquire into the secret of Christian experience, the more we realise the complete centrality of Jesus in that experience. From him came the faith itself, and from him all those features that have made possible its world-wide extension. Dr Burkitt is factually correct: 'Christianity lives or dies with the personality of Jesus.'

## 7 Decades

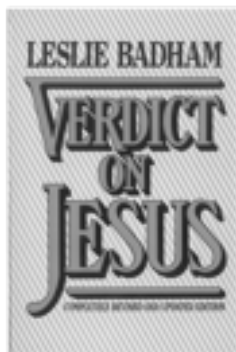
### *Verdict on Jesus through the years*



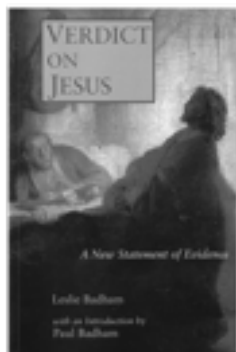
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1971



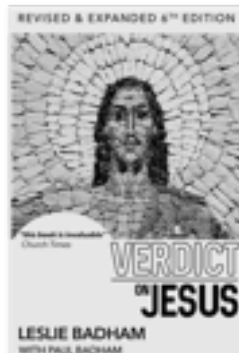
1983



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2010



2020

# Leslie Badham

*Author of Verdict on Jesus*

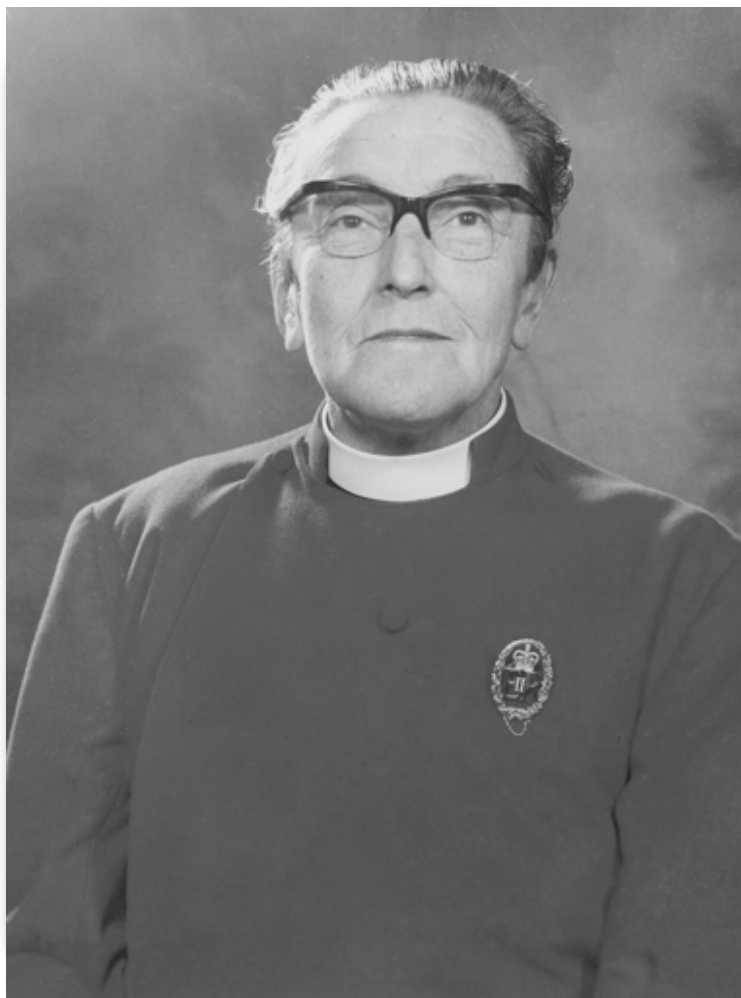


**Top left:** Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

**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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