

CHAPTER 8  
**THE TEST OF EXCELLENCE**



*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 EIGHT

### *The Test of Excellence: Jesus and Culture*

*In the end civilisation depends on man extending his powers of mind and spirit to the uttermost.*

Sir Kenneth Clark

As an avalanche gathers weight as it proceeds, our argument moves forward to consider a further fact about Jesus. The whole argument is cumulative, and what we say now presupposes what has gone before, and adheres to what we shall say later.

We now ask, 'What has been the nature of his contribution to human life?' The answer has already been foreshadowed. It has been of unmatched quality.

Some such general statement is likely to meet with ready approval. You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but only intrinsic quality can explain Jesus' central and continued place in history.

But how can we make real the full nature of that achievement? Or realise the width and worth of what has happened? When Christianity moved out into the Roman

Empire it must have seemed a thing of no possible lasting consequence. Small, scattered, persecuted, Christian groups looked very unlike being the torch-bearers of a new culture. Who could imagine they were holding the bridgeheads over which a faith would pass that would outlast the mighty Empire, survive the Dark Ages, and press forward the creative energies of a new civilisation?

But the incredible happened. We have to credit Christianity as the major shaping force in our culture and civilisation, with an excellence of influence hard to dispute.

The average person is inclined to believe that religion is one thing, and culture generally is another. It is striking to see how intimately they are related and interwoven. The vitality and character of a society is shaped by its religion.<sup>26</sup>

‘Throughout the greater part of humankind’s history,’ says Christopher Dawson, ‘in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great central unifying force in culture. We cannot understand the inner force of a society unless we understand its religion.’

Buddhism tamed the Mongols—look at the peaceful inhabitants of Tibet. Islam has influenced and transformed countless millions of people. Judaism has made distinctive a whole race. Christianity has given Western civilisation its characteristic features, and it is easy to agree with T. S. Eliot’s opinion that ‘the culture of Europe could not survive the complete disappearance of the Christian faith.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*

<sup>27</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*

As far as our own culture is concerned it has certainly been religion that has extended human powers of mind and spirit to the uttermost.

In architecture, for example, the master-builders, craftsmen, and artists have been superb interpreters of Christianity.

The Church of St Sophia in Constantinople was one of the most outstanding works of humankind. It was built about ad 537. In the days of its glory the doors were of gilt bronze, the windows of bronze grille, or translucent marble, the screen of silver, and the altar of enamelled gold. Nothing was too good for the glory of God.

The massive Norman style of Durham, Gloucester, and Southwell cathedrals suggests assurance. The vaulted roofs, the great piers, and the mighty towers, all speak confidence in the divine.

The soaring lines of Gothic must surely be one of humanity's most satisfying spiritual achievements. The columned shafts of Winchester, Salisbury, and the like, pass effortlessly into spanning vaults and poised and pointed arches. The very stone seems weightless, and stretches the mind to the infinite. Add now the spire and the bell-towers and the welcoming porches, the mullioned tracery filled with storied glass, and roofs 'where music dwells, fingering and wandering on as loth to die', and you have something so excellent that mind, spirit, and senses are all invited to respond.

Obviously it was the Church that provided the creative artists with their themes, and gave them the fullest scope for accessory carving, for tapestries, for the jewelled brilliance of glass as in Chartres, for glories of sculpture like the *Pieta* of Michelangelo in St Peter's, Rome.

It is a long ascent from the simple drawings in the catacombs to the elaborate frescoes of the Renaissance like *The Creation of Man* or *The Last Judgment* of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel; there is a long way between Salvador Dali's *Last Supper* in Washington and Leonardo da Vinci's in Milan, but the same faith tutored them all.

There is the obvious right of the doctrine 'Art for art's sake' but obviously Rembrandt's *Christ Preaching of Forgiveness*, and Giotto's *Kiss of Judas* will gain appreciation in depth if we understand their religious significance.

Some of us again, may be swift in our response to music, and give it a high place in our cultural heritage. From childhood, perhaps, we have responded to Bach's 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring', or Gounod's 'Ave Maria', or we may have been thrilled as Handel's 'Halleluiahs Chorus' tried to 'Bring all heaven before our eyes'. Or, perhaps, as members of a choral society, we may have noted how large a proportion of works, chosen primarily on musical merit, works that bear the emphatic stamp of greatness, have been the products of religious inspiration, like the *St Matthew Passion*, or *The Dream of Gerontius*. So music has done the work of an evangelist, and in the completion of our appreciation, has given us something more than music.

No matter, it seems, what medium expresses the highest life, that highest life owes something to one, whom the author of the Fourth Gospel called 'The Light of the World'. What a leap of faith that title entailed at the end of the first century. From some points of view it is more easily understood in the twentieth!

A walk round the oldest Universities provides some of the evidence. The very names of the colleges proclaim their Christian origin—Jesus, Corpus Christi, Trinity, Magdalen, All Souls, St John's.

Similarly, the inspiration that founded the great hospitals is embedded in their titles—St Bartholomew's, St Thomas's, St Mary's, St Luke's. And who would suggest that the influence that saturates the age-old traditions of such temples of learning and healing, requires any lengthy argument to establish its excellence?

Less well known, perhaps, is the contribution of Christianity to our legal constitution. Christian principles were introduced by the early Code of Justinian; by the laws of King Alfred who inscribed at the head of them the Ten Commandments; by Magna Carta with its introductory assertion that 'The Church shall be free and shall keep its laws'; by the Puritans pressing home The Declaration of Rights, and, as Christian principles penetrated more and more consciences, through countless reform bills and factory acts, and through numberless precedent laws, that owed their tone and excellence to successive judges who were themselves people of deep Christian conviction.

The influence of Christian principles penetrates to the very roots of our constitution. Despotism, arbitrary power, the stifling of individual liberty—these have been held in check by the doctrines of the Church that ‘there is a higher authority, a divine authority, to which all men owe allegiance’.<sup>28</sup> Definitions of guilt—that an action must be proved morally blameworthy; the axiom that people are innocent until proved guilty; forms of punishment—that they must not be so much vengeful as remedial—these are but a few of the conceptions that have come from Christianity.

Even less known than its influence on law, is the impetus Christianity has given to science. Modern science, it can be observed, has arisen entirely within the borders of Christendom. Its rise was not accidental. It drew on both Palestine and Greece.

Nothing, indeed, was further from the mind of the early and mediaeval Christian than that they were preparing the way for the rise of natural science; but they laid some of the foundations which made it possible. Jesus’ promise that ‘The Spirit of Truth will guide you into all truth’ in itself implied search and industry. The spirit of charity aided a democratic attitude, and anticipated what is best in humanism. Belief in God’s universal sovereignty carried with it a belief in the general rationality and order of the natural world that expressed itself in the mediaeval conception of an Order of Nature.

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<sup>28</sup> Lord Denning, *Church of England Newspaper*



Granted, of course, that eras of intense bigotry, cruel persecution, clericalist rule, and the suppression of new thought, have powerfully worked against science, yet when the Renaissance came and the Reformation burst the fetters, conceptions of immense significance from the earlier periods were released and bore fruit. As Dr Whitehead points out, 'the mediaeval insistence on the rationality of God' carried with it 'the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence could be correlated with its antecedents'.<sup>29</sup>

'The one creative achievement of the Reformation,' says Professor John Macmurray in *Reason and Emotion*, 'was science and the scientific spirit. Science is the legitimate child of a great religious movement, and its genealogy goes back to Jesus.'

So, science, the outstanding feature of the modern world, the gift that all non-Christians accept with unanimous enthusiasm, has its roots in what Jesus left grow.

Turn now, momentarily, to Christ's influence on language and literature. In well over a thousand languages and dialects, the thoughts of Jesus now travel the globe, not only to awaken people spiritually, but even to lift some races to literacy itself. Complete Bibles or New Testaments are available in no less than 578 tongues, while portions of the Scriptures are available in 853 more, so a total of 1,431 languages or dialects carry at least a portion of the Scriptures. Therefore, no less than 96 per cent of the world's population may be said to be in range of the Christian

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<sup>29</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, See also John Bailie and M. M. Foster

message. *The Greatest Book in the World*, by Dr Darlow, describes how several hundred languages have been reduced to written form, and provided for the first time with an alphabet and grammar, simply and solely that afterwards they might become vehicles for conveying the message of the Bible.

But the Bible has not only brought light to the simple, it has been a star of innumerable rays to the world's most sophisticated minds.

Is it not remarkable that the writings of Dante, Tolstoy, Emerson, Goethe, Shakespeare (to mention only a few) are saturated with the metaphors of a Jewish carpenter, and that the literary giants of Italy, Russia, America, Germany, and England, echo the ideas of Galilee? And the influence does not wane. The journalist, the dramatist, the statesman, the moral reformer, and, indeed, all of us in our day by day speech, stand under the eminence of Christ.

As one reads the brave books that house the hopes and insights, the wisdom and the gentleness, the moral passion and the greatness of our literary tradition, one realises the debt to him who 'spake as never man spake'—writings of devotion as distinct as Caedmon's 'Song of Creation', and Francis Lyte's 'Abide with Me'; of mysticism as varied as Blake's, Donne's, and Evelyn Underhill's; of moral force as influential as Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. Or what shall we say of the impress on our thought of Tyndale and Coverdale's Bible, The Authorised Version, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*?

Indeed, the influence does not end with specific inspirations. Christianity has contributed also to the background of all whose writings have used, or presupposed, Christian values and ideals and morality. Has not Norman Nicholson pointed out that without a Christian context of faith and morality, literature in general, even in competent hands, tends to become arid and joyless, unlit and purposeless?<sup>30</sup>

Deep in the Arctic Circle I have seen the Aurora Borealis slashing the midnight sky with scimitars of steel-blue light, but even as one watched, the metaphor became inappropriate. The light softened and changed into ribbons of gold, crimson, and jade, flying out over the ice-caps and the ebony of the sea. Then again, its form would change, and the strange light would shape itself into a triumphal archway, spanning all that was visible in that cold world, and being magically reflected in it.

So one would describe the quality of Christ's influence as it has shone across the dark centuries; as in the many phases, changes, and spheres through which it has passed, men and movements have reflected its light and colour.

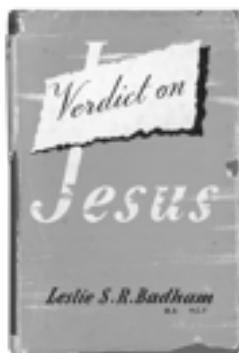
The mere mention, then, of what Jesus has meant to the highest life of the human race is likely to make one sensitive of their own limitations, to see with keener eyes the narrowness of his appreciations, the pathetic width of his ignorance! It may rightly be said that 'Christianity is a religion that educates'.

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<sup>30</sup> *Man and Literature*.

## 7 Decades

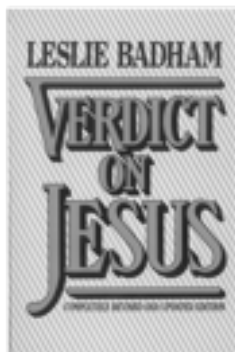
### *Verdict on Jesus through the years*



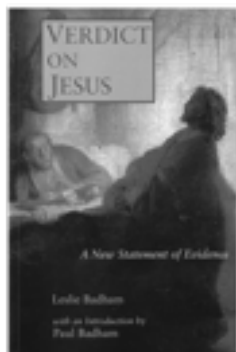
1950



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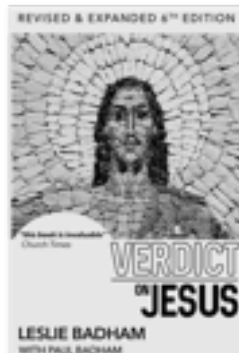
1983



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2010



2020

## Leslie Badham

*Author of Verdict on Jesus*

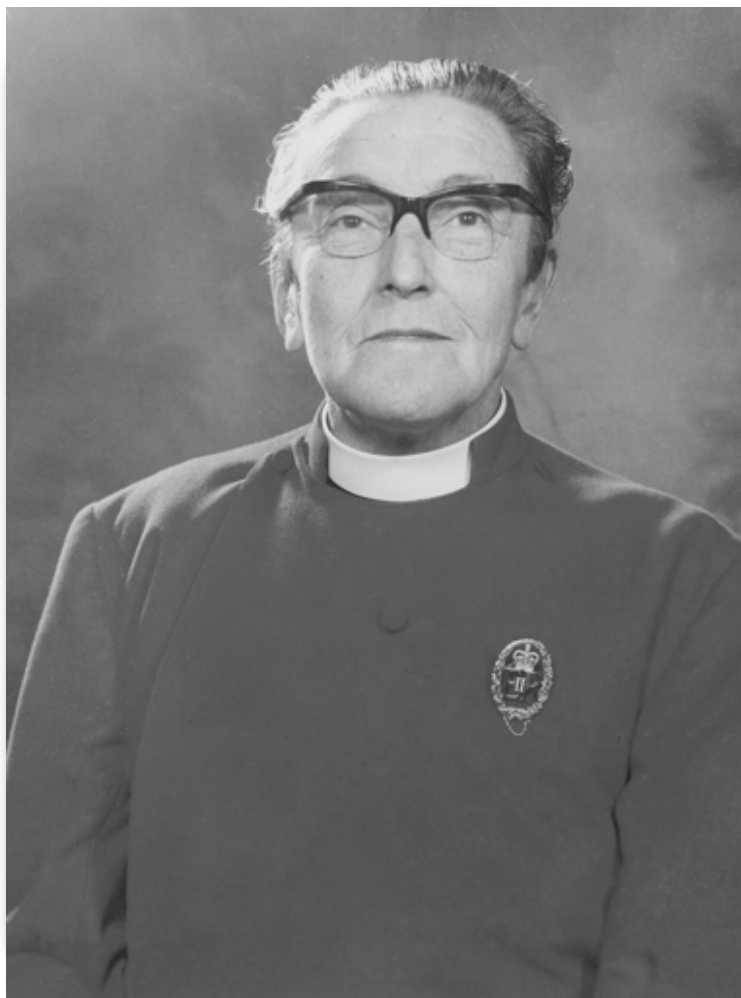


**Top left:** Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

**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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