Sheldon’s In His Steps: Conscience and Discipleship  
By James H. Smylie

*"Our purpose here is to retrace Sheldon's In His Steps, to place it theologically within the Christocentric evangelical tradition in which context the author was able to emphasize Jesus as the pattern of Christian life, to examine some cases of conscience within the book and the cost of discipleship for his characters, and to suggest that Sheldon was interested in comprehensive reform programs."*

CHARLES M. SHELDON'S religious novel, *In His Steps*, grew out of a series of Sunday evening sermons preached in the minister's Central Congregational Church, Topeka, Kansas. One of the all-time best sellers, *In His Steps* was originally addressed to the young people of Sheldon's congregation, to the members of the Christian Endeavor Society, and to students from Washburn College. [1](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#1) The biblical text for the sermon series was I Peter 2:21- "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps." The homilies, in story form, were printed serially, beginning Nov. 5, 1896, in *The Advance*, a Congregational weekly. [2](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#2)

The novel has long been considered one of the great American tracts because of its wide-spread distribution. According to Ralph Gabriel, it did for the "Social Gospel" movement what T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the temperance and anti-slavery movements. [3](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#3) The basic story is familiar. The Reverend Henry Maxwell, pastor of the First Church in Raymond, is preparing, on Saturday, his Sunday sermon on the text of I Peter 2:21 in which he is discussing "the atonement as personal sacrifice." He intends to emphasize the doctrine "from the side of example," giving illustrations from the life and teachings of Jesus and showing how "faith in the Christ helped to save men because of the patterns or character he displayed for their imitation." [4](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#4)

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1 *In His Steps,* 70th Anniversary Edition, 1897-1967, *Bulletin No. 44,* Shawnee County Historical Society, Winter, 1967, pp. 1-146. This is a nicely illustrated edition which includes a number of interesting articles on the author and the book.  
2 "The Story of 'In His Steps'," in *Charles Sheldon His Life Story* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925), p. 97.  
3 Ralph Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1940), p. 321.

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The minister is interrupted by a vagrant, who has lost his wife, lost his job, and is separated from his daughter. On Sunday, this same man hears Maxwell preach his sermon as he worships with the congregation. He interrupts the worship to comment on the sermon and to ask what the pastor and congregation mean when they sing "Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee." Later he dies in Maxwell's home. He makes such an impression on the pastor that on the next Sunday, Maxwell invites members of his church to volunteer to take a pledge for a year. They are to ask themselves in every situation of life, "What would Jesus do?" and to carry through on their conclusions regardless of the cost to themselves.

A number of persons meet after church in a type of church-withinthe-church, to speak about their commitment. These include, among others, Virginia Page, a wealthy heiress; Edward Norman, a newspaper editor; Alexander Powers, a business man; and Donald Marsh, a college president. The novel focuses on families in First Church and on the Rectangle in Raymond, a vacant lot in the middle of the city's saloon and slum district, and the scene of a revival, Then it shifts to Chicago's mansions and tenements as the influence of the pledge spreads. There is romance in the book for the young people. Converted girl, Miss Winslow, who sings at the First Church and at the revival meeting, finally accepts boy, Virginia Page's brother, who is finally converted and takes the pledge along with Rachel. The novel has to do with the way in which these people attempt to follow after Jesus as the pattern for their lives and the texts of the Bible which suggest this as a model for Christian ethics. [5](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#5)

For years people have discussed how many copies of *In His Steps* have been printed-estimates range anywhere from 2,000,000 to 30,000,000 and nobody really knows. [6](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#6) While this may be important, the real problem is the place of *In His Steps* in the Social Gospel movement since it was published in the midst of much social concern in American society. It appeared seven years after W.D.P. Bliss organized the Society of Christian Socialists, and in the same year Bliss published *The Encyclopedia of Social Reform*, both illustrations of the ferment. It was published one year after the New York Federation

4 Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1937). All citations will be from this edition which is labelled an "authorized" version. Hereafter IHS. There are at least eight available editions of the tract.  
5 Sheldon did not attempt to do any exegetical work on the texts which he used. In a sense he employs them to show how prevalent are references in the Bible to this theme of following after Jesus.  
6 For a discussion of this matter see John W. Ripley, "Last Rites for a Few Myths," in *Bulletin* No. 44, pp. 14-26. There seems to be no question that the book was widely circulated and developed a life of its own.

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of Churches and Christian Workers was organized in 1895, signalling dissatisfaction of American Protestants with the Evangelical Alliance and preparing the way for the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America in 1908. Walter Rauschenbusch had just been called to Rochester Theological Seminary, and Reinhold Niebuhr, born in 1892, was five years old. [7](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#7) Everybody recognizes that *In His Steps* is badly written and is not a great work of literature, but it is still being referred to by historians, and it is still being read by uncounted thousands, if the number of editions in which it appears is any gage of its circulation. [8](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#8)

Our purpose here is to retrace Sheldon's *In His Steps*, to place it theologically within the Christocentric evangelical tradition in which context the author was able to emphasize Jesus as the pattern of Christian life, to examine some cases of conscience within the book and the cost of discipleship for his characters, and to suggest that Sheldon was interested in comprehensive reform programs.

I

Sheldon indicates that Henry Maxwell's sermon on I Peter 2:21 was to be about the "patterns or character" Jesus displayed for the imitation of his disciples. Sheldon used Jesus as the pattern to provide "moral motive power," to use Newman Smyth's term in his *Christian Ethics* of 1892. [9](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#9) Sheldon reached back, not only to the New Testament for the texts which he used for the basis of his various episodes but also into Christian history for one of the oldest and simplest models of Christian ethical life. This is the demand that Christians be conformed to Jesus, in his life and in his death, to be obedient to the obedient one. This is a model which runs deep in Christian tradition, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, especially in its mystical and ascetic strains. It was employed in a practical manner by Christians, such as Sheldon, who were identified with the Christocentric

7 See Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1949), p. 242. Also W. D. P. Bliss, *et al*., *The Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1897). This volume came out the year *In His Steps* was published in book form and it contains indispensable information about the concerns of the social Christianity movement and cases of conscience.  
8 For various kinds of historical evaluations, see: *Charles Howard Hopkins, The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism,* 1865-1915 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 141-144; Grier Nichol, "The Image of the Protestant Minister in the Christian Social Novel," *Church History*, XXXVII, 3 (Sept., 1968), pp. 319-334; Martin E. Marty, *The Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), p. 201; Paul S. Boyer, "In His Steps: A Reappraisal," *American Quarterly*, XXIII, I (Spring, 1971), pp. 60-78; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 776-777; Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (2nd ed., New York: Scribner's, 1973), p. 312.  
9 Newman Smyth, *Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1927), p. 489. This volume was first published in 1892. Smyth writes about the matter: "Not only by its wealth of truths which are convertible into ethical uses does Christianity prove itself to be moral power in the world, but also it moves men even more profoundly through the influence of Christ's life and example," p. 491.

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evangelicalism of the nineteenth century. [10](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#10) In the midst of the troubles of the "mauve decade" Sheldon proposed to his listeners and readers a new life style which he believed would help them live responsibly as Christians in the midst of the volcanos erupting around them.

Sheldon wrote in the period of the success hero, symbolized by Andrew Carnegie, a poor immigrant who made good and who was celebrating his rise to prominence in the "Gospel of Wealth." Carnegie enunciated as the divine laws of his success, individualism, competition and the accumulation of wealth, and the trusteeship of riches. Horatio Alger, an older contemporary of Sheldon, fictionalized this rise from tenement slum to millionaire's mansion with luck and pluck in his novels about "Ragged Dick" and "Tattered Tom." William T. Stead published *If Christ Came to Chicago* in 1894 and spotlighted the "Chicagoan Trinity," George M. Pullman, Marshall Field, Philip Armour, the "great gods" of the "Mecca of Mammon." When Sheldon's young people, affluent themselves and surrounded by these stories of success, met with him on Sunday evening, he presented to them another hero, one who called them to service and sacrifice of a different kind.

Sheldon, a son of a South Dakota farmer-preacher, was educated at Brown University and Andover Theological Seminary, graduating in 1889. He imbibed the Christocentric evangelical tradition which had emerged after the Civil War. The major theological tradition in nineteenth century American Protestantism was basically theocentric, whether it was of the Calvinist or Arminian variety.

The ethical models for this earlier tradition were based upon what God has done for the Christian and the world through Christ, and the application and appropriation of God's work in Christ in a legal way. Christ is the justifier, through whose work the Christian is made righteous before God. Christ is the sanctifier, through whose work the Christian may grow more and more in righteousness. Both of these models are prescriptive in the sense that the measure of righteousness is God's law in personal and public affairs. Both the Calvinist and Arminian were deeply involved in revivalism as a means of conviction and conversion, and both generated interest in perfectionism in the nineteenth century.

While Sheldon is clearly a part of this older theocentric tradition and employs it in his novel, he is also a part of a newer theological trend which is Christocentric. The development is usually associated with Horace Bushnell who published in 1866 what turned out to be the

10 The author is indebted to James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), for this typology and insights into Jesus the pattern. See H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity* (2 vols., New York: Scribner's, 1960, 1963), II, pp. 215 ff., for theological developments during this period, especially the development of the "Christocentric Liberal Tradition"; and William G. McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals*, 1800-1900 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968).

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first volume of *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*. The Hartford pastor turned his attention to a fresh analysis of the atoning work of Jesus. Cutting through the legal aspects of the earlier tradition, he placed an emphasis upon Jesus' sacrifice as an example of God's love for the Christian, and the Christian's love of the neighbor. [11](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#11) In the 1880s, the years during which Sheldon was studying in the East, the Andover faculty was engaged in a serious discussion of this view of Jesus and his work. Jesus was a model of self-sacrificing love. The emergence of a new type of character, rather than the metaphysics of his being, is the important thing. And Andover continued the development of an emphasis upon Christus in nobis, upon the formation of a companionship and communion of those who become new persons through him. Christ, the justifier and sanctifier, is now Jesus, the immanent revelation of God, who discloses the moral ideal and secures moral progress. [12](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#12)

II

When we turn to Sheldon's novel, we should remember that it was first delivered as moral motivation for young people. This may be what makes it appear as "non-programmatic sentimentalism." [13](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#13) There is much more program in *In His Steps*, however, than first meets the eye. Sheldon attempts to alert his audience to what is going on among Christians concerned about the social problems of the age. Two things should be said about the approach of the novel. Sheldon employs as his chief text, I Peter 2:21 ("For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps"), a text which occurs over and over again in the story. He supplements this text with others of the same type which summon Christians to follow after Jesus. The story does not deal systematically with how a Christian moves from the demand of the text to decide what Jesus would do. Characters do that in the context of social Christianity of the period, in the context of the small communion of those who have taken the pledge, and with a surprising degree of modesty. They come to conclusions about what Jesus would "probably" do.

Characters share one thing in common. They know that they have been blessed with abundance, but that Jesus summons them not to

11 Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (2 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903).  
12 Daniel Day Williams, *The Andover Liberals* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), pp. 64 ff. For a contrast showing how the popular lives of Jesus may have influenced lifestyles see Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus the Christ* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1871), pp. 311, 353, 361; and Lyman Abbott, *A Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), p. 235. Beecher suggests that the Jesus pattern must be cut to fit the American economy, not the economy to fit the pattern. Abbott insists upon self-sacrifice. He writes: "And it is only by a voluntary crucifixion for the truth that the Christian lets his light so shine before men that they glorify his Father who is in heaven." Abbott had invited the young Sheldon to join him on the staff of the *Outlook* after the latter's graduation from Andover.  
13 Hopkins, pp. 141-144.

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success, but to self-sacrifice, self-denial, self-renunciation. They know that faithfulness in discipleship should cost them something. It may be that when all is said and done, given the radical demands of Jesus, the cost for the characters is moderate. But Sheldon does not advise his readers to dodge the cost, to fly from the world. He calls them not to an escape, but to involvement, to a life of apostolic and practical simplicity.

Sheldon does not mention Thomas à Kempis, the mystic with whom the *imitatio* theme is often identified. He does mention Francis of Assisi who identified himself with the poor. While clergymen are prominent in the novel, it is communication with and a challenge for laypersons, who are the main characters of the story.

In his attempt to motivate and give direction, Sheldon casts his morality play in a familiar mold. He deals with a number of cases of conscience. The term, "case of conscience," is an old one used in Protestant casuistry to deal with problems in economics, politics, and social relations. When we read *In His Steps*, we are immediately impressed with two cases which Sheldon has on his mind, those concerning the use of alcohol and of Sunday observance. As Robert T. Handy has pointed out in *A Christian America*, these two cases of conscience had become important for American Protestants in measuring their expectations for a Christianized and civilized society. [14](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#14) This preoccupation in Sheldon has been interpreted as showing the narrowness of his range of interest and an accurate reflection of frightened middle-class Protestantism, troubled about the saloon and the continental Sabbath.

Before we dismiss these matters we should remember that in Sheldon's time the use and abuse of wine and beers as well as spiritous liquors had become a problem of national concern, and the power of the liquor industry in every level of government was considerable. Moreover, while for some, working hours were reasonable, in heavy industry the hours were long, hard, and included Sunday. Sunday labor was becoming more common, and there was a deep concern that along with the introduction of the continental Sabbath would come a continental work week.

Protestants may have over-reacted along with others in insisting upon total abstinence and a strict sabbatarianism, and thus exposed the worse aspects of the ethical model. The problems with which they were concerned should not be treated lightly, nor as the only cases of conscience with which they are troubled and about which they were

14 Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America, Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971). The author traces these two reform movements throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. My own feeling is that Handy neglects other movements which may have been every bit as important. Preoccupation with these crusades in histories may tell us as much about liberal reactions to the prohibition movement and Sabbatarianism as it does about those who were involved in them. See Bliss, *Encyclopedia*, for figures on liquor consumption and the increase of Sunday labor.

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seeking guidance. [15](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#15) As a matter of fact, as Robert T. Cross points out in *The Church and the City,* the responses to the manifold problems of industrialized America were multiform. [16](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#16)

If we look closely at various cases of conscience in *In His Steps* we shall see how Sheldon alerts his young listeners and his readers to many of them. Each case involves a person who has a change of heart, who takes the pledge, and who asks herself or himself what Jesus would do. Each case involves a personal response, but touches corporate life and highlights some of the challenges which Christians had to face in a rapidly changing society. Each case involves a person who pays the cost of discipleship, and in doing so, shows how her life or his life impinges upon the larger community, often separating them from family and friends.

*Case of Conscience I.* Virginia Page is a wealthy heiress, a woman of the leisure class, who lives in a mansion in Raymond with her grandmother. Her problem is the stewardship of her inheritance, or trusteeship as Andrew Carnegie put it in his article on wealth in 1889. This was a nagging problem for Virginia after she took the pledge, asking herself "What would Jesus do?" with her money. She is drawn more and more to the Rectangle and takes up playing the organ for the revival meeting there and to accompany Rachel Winslow.

During the course of one of the revivals a fallen girl by the name of Loreen comes under conviction for sin and is converted. Virginia knows that this girl cannot go back into the slums in which she was involved in her trade, and a plan for the use of her wealth begins to take place. Virginia takes Loreen home. She comes up against the resistance of her grandmother, who had already shown hostility toward the conception of Jesus as a

15 See Bliss, *Encyclopedia*, for the rich variety of entries.  
16 Robert D. Cross, ed., *The Church and the City*, 1865-1910 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill), p. xii. In addition to Hopkins and May see Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City*, 1878-1898 (New York: Macmillan, 1933) for various aspects of city life during this period. Schlesinger has a valuable bibliography on various cases of conscience mentioned here.

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sacrifice. Sheldon, using Matthew 10:35 ("For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law"), shows how attempts to follow after Jesus, often separate members of the same household. Virginia's grandmother protests bringing "scum" into the home, and insists that her grandchild send Loreen to an "asylum for helpless women" for the sake of the Page reputation. Virginia protests that society is not her god. She keeps Loreen, and tells her grandmother than if she does not like it she may leave. Grandmother packs up for parts South.

The most sensational scene in the whole novel takes place when Virginia takes Loreen back to the Rectangle for a meeting. An angry crowd threatens them. Loreen pushes Virginia out of the path of a flying bottle, but is killed by the object herself- she dies a vicarious sacrifice. Sheldon blames the drunken crowd. But he also blames "Christian America" for permitting the conditions in which Loreen could be exploited and murdered.

Virginia decides to use the bulk of her wealth, in cooperation with her brother, who has also been converted, to transform the Rectangle. She studies the methods of Christian work in city slums and decides to build wholesome lodging-houses, refuges for poor women and shop girls. To her friend Rachel Winslow she proposes a Musical Institute. [17](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#17) With this use of her wealth, including her own personal involvement in the enterprise, she hopes to make "reparation" for Loreen.

*Case of Conscience II*. Virginia also uses part of her fortune to undergird Edward Norman's experiment in responsible journalism. Norman is a newspaper editor who is moved by Maxwell's suggestion and takes the pledge. He asks himself what Jesus would do in running a modern newspaper-in a day of popular penny-papers, yellow journalism thriving on sensationalism, and the Sunday special. [18](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#18) Sheldon introduces the chapter in which he described Norman, struggling with this question, with the text of I John 2:6 ("He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked"). The author admonishes that those who say they abide in Christ ought to walk as he walked. He decides that Jesus would strive to print only such news and only those advertisements which were fit to print, and do so on every day except Sunday.

In attempting to deal with his Christian responsibilities, Norman decides that he will not run stories which pander to the masses, such as the account of a very brutal prize fight. He decides not to carry liquor and tobacco advertisements, since by doing so he would contribute to the continuation of habits and forces in the community he felt were detrimental to it. He also decides to do away with a very profitable Sunday edition and to print the special Sunday features on Saturday.

Norman determines that probably Jesus would work out a method of profit-sharing with editors, reporters, pressmen, and all who contribute anything to the life of the paper. When he advises his subordinates about his decisions, he is considered insane, an idiot, a fool, bent on bankrupting the whole business with such an absurd moral standard. Although Norman feels the financial loss almost im-

17 See Schlesinger on prostitution and steps taken to deal with this subject. Also see for one strategy, Otto Wilson, *Fifty Years' Work with Girls*, 1883-1933, *A Story of the Florence Crittendon Homes* (Alexandria, Va.: The National Florence Crittendon Mission, 1933).  
18 See Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, *A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 Years*, 1690-1940 (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 519 ff., for the challenge of yellow journalism. For Sheldon's own experiment in newspaper reform see Billie Barnes Jensen, "A Social Gospel Experiment in Newspaper Reform: Charles M. Sheldon and the Topeka Daily Capital," *Church History*, XXXIII, I (March, 1964), pp. 74-83.

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mediately, he nevertheless persists in his experiment in responsible editing. Moreover, as Virginia Page helps him, he determines to support through his editorials the causes of two other men who have taken the pledge and who have determined to follow Jesus in the reforming of the society.

*Case of Conscience III*. Alexander Powers, a member of Maxwell's congregation, is part of middle management. He runs a railroad shop and supervises the work of about three hundred men. He also must decide what it means to walk as Jesus walked in his work, to take up his cross daily (Mark 10:21). He and his wife and daughter are security oriented, and have learned to enjoy luxury and a good place in Raymond society. At first he decides that he needs to improve the working conditions of his men. He takes a first step by providing a clean place for them to eat their lunches and to bear, for edification, talks on subjects which may help their lives.

By accident, Powers comes across conclusive evidence that his company is engaged in a systematic violation of the newly passed inter-state commerce laws of the United States and of state laws passed to prevent railroad trusts. What would Jesus do in this situation? After all, everybody was doing it, in all probability, and what could one man do in the railroad business which made it almost impossible to live by the Christian standard. Everybody would misunderstand him. He would be dragged into court as a witness, he would lose his position, and he and his family would be put in disgrace in society. Powers concludes that he cannot withhold the information. He resigns his job and turns over the documents to the proper authorities. Sheldon acknowledges in a note at this point that a railroad man told him that he could only admire the shrewdness with which the companies violated the law. [19](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#19)

Powers is not supported in this decision by his wife and daughter, who refuse to be seen in public. He is in addition to this hurt, misunderstood, misrepresented, and he returns to his old job of telegraph operator at a much lower wage. Powers discovers that a man's "foes are they of his own household," and Jesus is the great divider of life. Powers is supported by the newspaper who praises the sacrifice of one individual who wishes to see equal justice under law-tbe enforcement of the law against great corporations as well as the weakest of individuals. Powers sees the irony of his situation. He knows that it pays a railroad to have in its employment men who are temperate and honest. When it comes to a situation in which one of those temperate and honest employees discovers that the management is engaged in un-Christian, lawless acts, it does not pay. Then Christian temperance and honesty may become a cross for those who blow the whistle on the culprits.

19 See Schlesinger, pp. 395, 409-410, 415, for how the interstate commerce laws were violated. This case of conscience sounds like the problem many Nixon Administration people have felt in dealing with the "Watergate Affair."

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*Case of Conscience IV*. Donald Marsh also takes the pledge. He is the president of Lincoln College and a long-time professor of ethics and philosophy. His problem of conscience is municipal reform, and his special text seems to be "If any man serve me, let him follow me" (John 12:26). He has to admit that despite his professional concern for ethics, he is a complete stranger to politics. He seems to consider politics, even when he expresses an interest in it, not a high calling from God but a Cross he must bear, thus indicating the manner in which the office of civil magistrate had been degraded as a vocation. His experience on the Mount of Transfiguration becomes a way station to a Calvary in city affairs. [20](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#20)

He knows that the city is in the hands of corrupt, unprincipled men, controlled in large part by the whiskey men, who have turned city government into a "horrible whirlpool of deceit, bribery, political trickery and saloonism." He decides that the city needs "clean, honest, capable, businesslike city administration," and that he must run for office. Along with other professional people, he has been a political coward, avoiding the "sacred duties of citizenship, either ignorantly or selfishly." He now realizes he must suffer in the fight for clean city life. He agrees with the Italian leader, Mazzini, that he must appeal to his fellow citizens to come and suffer with him in the struggle. In his attempt to organize righteousness against "rum and corruption," he learns from the entrenched politicians by packing a nominating meeting. They were "in the habit of carrying on the affairs of the city as if they owned them and everyone else was simply a tool or a cipher."

Marsh wins in the primary but loses at the polls. Sheldon blames Christians who fail to vote for the narrow margin of the defeat and the continuation of bad government in Raymond. While the blow to Marsh is a deep one, he continues the administration of the college and his teaching with new attitudes to public affairs. He instructs his students that those who have education have special civic responsibilities, especially for the "weak and the ignorant."

*Case of Conscience V*. The last case of conscience involves two clergymen in Chicago, where the scene shifts in the last of the novel, Dr. Calvin Bruce (what could be more Presbyterian!) and a "Bishop," who could be either an Episcopalian or a Methodist. These two fall

20 Sheldon obviously ties in the liquor industry with corruption. But his solution is not simply prohibition. It is honest government. These are two different matters. Readers of *In His Steps* are likely to forget the Whiskey Ring that left the Grant Administration with a bad smell. What some critics do not point out is the fact that professional people in America had downgraded the political office which had been considered in the Calvinist tradition one of God's highest callings. Russell Conwell contributed to this in *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1915), a sermon which he delivered numerous times during this period. He degraded the civil magistrate and exalted the acquisition of riches. Sheldon is trying to turn the tables at this point. See interesting comments on what Christian Endeavor was doing, John Willis Baer, "The Work of Christian Endeavor Societies in Behalf of Better Citizenship," *Proceedings of the Second National Conference for Good City Government* …. 1894 (Philadelphia: National Municipal League, 1895), pp. 517-523. also Schlesinger.

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under Maxwell's influence. They take the pledge and ask themselves at the height of their very successful lives: "What would Jesus do?" They have position and prestige. The "Bishop" has considerable possessions. They decide that neither one of them has really paid anything in discipleship and that they have lived apart from the troubles of the city and those who are poor, degraded, and abandoned in this life. They confess that they are haunted by the text of I Peter 2:2 1. The "Bishop" expresses sentiments for them both when he admits that if he had lived in the time of Luther he might have sought God's favor through self-inflicted torture. Here is a touch of masochism, the desire to suffer for suffering's sake. But in the present case the desire is channelled by the two clergymen in their commitment to city mission enterprise.

They reflect on the strange situation in which they find themselves among the Christians whom they have been serving. If they-a "Doctor of Divinity and a Bisbop"-would resign charges and go to Bombay, Hong Kong, and Africa to save souls, they would be hailed as heroes of the faith. As they lose themselves in darkest Chicago, for Jesus' sake, they are considered queer. They decide that they cannot be Christians by proxy, and they move to a Settlement House in the worst part of Chicago. [21](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#21) Here they work with alcoholics, attempting to convert them by identifying with them and assuring them of God's love and their love. Here they attempt to rehabilitate these persons and to provide for those who live in the area a substitute for the saloon, a place where they can meet, talk, and deal with their problems. Here they sponsor teaching and learning, as in the case of one young settlement worker who instructs immigrant women on how to deal with adulterated food. [22](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#22) "Martyrdom," the Bishop muses in one place about his case of conscience, "is a lost art with us. Our Christianity loves its ease and comfort too well to take up anything so rough and heavy as a cross. And yet what does Jesus mean? What is it to walk in his steps?"

III

Sheldon writes about several other cases of conscience in his novel. These indicate the wide range of his interest, and the way in which be was attempting to carry the responsibility of Christian education within his congregation. It is very easy, of course, to make a case against Sheldon for what seems to be a preoccupation with the liquor question and Sabbatarianism. It may be convenient to do this and overlook the fact that he was trying to give some direction in dealing with many of the major issues confronting people in his middle-class

21 See Schlesinger on Settlement House work engaged in by numerous people, including Jane Addams and Grace Dodge, etc. See Raymond Calkins, *Substitues for the Saloon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), a study done for The Committee of Fifty which was concerned for the liquor problem.  
22 Sheldon's concern for pure foods antedates the work of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* by several years.

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congregation and which were on the hearts of many Americans. Henry May is right when he calls attention to Sheldon's insistence upon a change of heart, but wrong when he implies that Sheldon left the matter there. Charles Hopkins is right when he sees that Sheldon makes a place for the works of charity, but wrong when he implies that Sheldon was not interested in justice too. Paul S. Boyer is right when he calls attention to the psychological fear which may be found in the novel. But he is wrong when he does not see the cases of conscience as genuine attempts to contribute to the public good, and not just attempts to insure a dominant role in the society. Sydney E. Ahlstrom is right when he identifies Sheldon as a "major apostle of not only the Social gospel but of the broader liberal movement as well." [23](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#23)

Although it is very important to assess these various cases of conscience, we must keep in mind what seems to be Sheldon's primary purpose. He wanted to motivate his hearers and his readers and to give them an option for a life style not very popular in the "Gilded Age." Milton Wright, businessman who takes the pledge and runs his retail store as Jesus would run it, put his case of conscience in this way. Would he do business as usual on the basis of the regular code: "Will it pay?" Or could he do business in a different way, to make a living for himself and others, with another question: "What would Jesus do?"

When Sheldon adopted his ethical model, he wanted to challenge the code which was the path to success, with a code which called to service. In his emphasis upon Jesus as the pattern, of course, he ran the dangers involved in this ethical model, including those which come when Christ's crucifixion becomes the Christian's supreme *exemplum.* The Christian who takes the pledge tends to forget who he or she is. The Christian forgets that it is God who justifies and sanctifies by his grace, and gives the power to follow in Jesus' steps.

In a liberal age, in which an emphasis is placed upon human potential and progress, the imitation of Jesus may lead to a new form of legalism, works righteousness, and an eroticism in the very basic sense of that word-selfish love. [24](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#24) But we must return to Sheldon's purpose. He wanted to motivate people to deal with the "destructive selfishness of the age" and to promote a revival of the "Christianity of Christ." He employed the form of the sentimental novel as a vehicle to convey his ethical concern to his congregation, and he did so with considerable effectiveness.

Sheldon has been accused of individualism, and *In His Steps* has been weighed and found wanting because Sheldon did not deal with matters of justice. Sheldon did believe that changed hearts would lead to a changed society. That is the reason he placed an emphasis upon

23 See notes 7 and 8, above.  
24 See Gustafson; also Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), pp. 348, 635, 663-664.

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revivalism and social affections. Walter Rauschenbusch paid tribute to Sheldon's emphasis upon the imitation of Jesus, but suggested that the chief value of Sheldon's efforts was "to bring home the fact that it is hard to live a Christ-like life in a mammonistic society." It convicts, Rauschenbusch writes, but does not really demand a transformation of social institutions. [25](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#25) Sheldon may have been individualistic in the sense that has been indicated. But he was deeply involved in exploring social alternatives for the transformation of society, other than the cases of conscience which have already been described. Before he wrote *In His Steps*, he had already shown concern for Christian sociology and Christian socialism. He supported *The Kingdom*, founded in 1894, to explore social issues, and he took an interest in the Christian Commonwealth Colony, an experiment in Christian communism in Georgia, organized in 1896. [26](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#26) In his best-known novel he approached Christian socialism with a question after an attack upon Christians and the churches made by a socialist speaker:

Was the church then so far from the Master that the people no longer found Him in the church? Was it true that the church has lost its power over the very kind of humanity which in the early ages of Christianity it reached in the greatest numbers? How much was true in what the Socialist leader said about the uselessness of looking to the church for reform or redemption, because of the selfishness and seclusion and aristocracy of its members?

Sheldon does not answer in a satisfactory way his own question in *In His Steps*, but he did not drop his concern. *In The Heart of the World, A Story of Christian Socialism*, published in 1905, he affirms aspects of the socialist movement. Later in "*Jesus is Here!" Continuing the Narrative of In His Steps* *(What Would Jesus Do?)*, the author approved the corporate effort of American Protestantism in the Federal Council of Churches, organized in 1908, to frame, as he puts it, a "definite program of the Kingdom in this age of the world." [27](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-article3.htm#27)

Just as Harriet Beecher Stowe was in closer touch with pre-Civil War America than was Herman Melville, so Charles Sheldon was in closer touch than, say, Brooks or Henry Adams, with middle-class America at the end of the century. Sheldon's role was one of communication, in which he carried to his congregation and to large audiences the ideas of Lyman Abbott, Richard Ely, George Herron, Walter Rauschenbusch. That was his intention when he first delivered *In His Steps* to his young people at the Central Congregational

25 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), p. 46.  
26 See Robert Hardy's *Seven Days* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, n. d., and *The Crucifixion of Phillip Strong* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1894) for earlier discussions of Christian sociology and Christian socialism. Also James Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 11, 138.  
27 See The Heart of the World, *A Story of Christian Socialism* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1905), pp. 27, 116, 140-141; and "Jesus is Here!" *Continuing Narrative of In His Steps* (What Would Jesus Do?) (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913-1914).

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Church in Topeka, Kansas. It may be that in his presentation of cases of conscience and his challenges to Christians to pay the cost of discipleship, he helped along the reforming movements of people like William Jennings Bryan, who never gained presidential power, and Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who did.

Sheldon's *In His Steps* is still read by people who are looking for a model for ethical decision making. It would be difficult for us to determine who is touched by this novel and how people are touched by it. While Christian ethicists debate weighty matters of right and justice, simple people who have never opened a book in Christian ethics look for a way to move from some faith commitment to action. Some of us cannot always communicate with middle-class America, much less give them moral motivation and moral guidance. Moreover, it occurs to me that those people who are still within the revivalist tradition of Billy Graham or in the charismatic tradition, long for ethical guidance which their leaders do not always give them. Therefore, Sheldon still enjoys a popularity today, for good or ill. His book may perpetuate questionable ideas about following after Jesus as a pattern and an imitation life-style. It may also give a wrong impression about the context in which Christians have to make ethical decisions. Contemporary readers probably do not know about Sheldon's sympathies with Christian socialism or the "Social Creed" of the Federal Council of Churches. And readers are faced with the problem of correlating Christian faith into life in a society which is vastly different than the one for which Sheldon wrote. But people who read Sheldon may be yearning for some word about Christian behavior, may want to face up to their responsibilities, and may be willing to pay the cost of discipleship. The continued popularity of *In His Steps* may be a judgment upon Christian ethicists under the influence of Niebuhrian realism, perhaps, for not communicating better with Christian people today. It may be possible to engage those exploring the In His Steps life-style in responsible Christian dialogue and decision-making.