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## Charles M. Sheldon and the Heart of the Social Gospel Movement

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

CHARLES M. SHELDON AND THE HEART OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT

By

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## ABSTRACT

In 1896, Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon wrote the seminal social gospel novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*. What began as an attempt to inspire college students in Topeka, Kansas became a national bestseller that continued to inspire millions long after its initial publication. Historians and literary critics disagree about the literary merit and historical significance of both Sheldon and his most famous novel. Much of this debate concentrates on the relative sophistication and originality of Sheldon's prose as well as the degree of liberal or conservative influences in the text. In the process, historians and literary critics set Sheldon apart from other social gospelers as a direct result of his popularity. This paper intends to further scholarship by placing Sheldon in conversation with other social gospel thinkers rather than distinguishing him as a "popular" figure. In doing so, historical understanding of social gospel movements can broaden to include figures like Sheldon and places like Kansas. The historiography of the social gospel currently stifles a movement that was more fluid than is typically considered. By bringing Sheldon fully into the social gospel movement, the historiography can maintain its urban, industrial, and intellectual core while also allowing for less acknowledged areas of the social gospel movement like frontier, rural, and middle-brow reformers and reform movements. Furthermore, Sheldon provides the best perspective on social gospel history and historiography because the phrase and concept driving *In His Steps* mainstreamed the social gospel. To avoid the popularity of *In His Steps* or the centrality of "What would Jesus do?" to the social gospel ignores the heart of the social gospel movement.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1896 Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon published his seminal novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*. *In His Steps* centers around Reverend Henry Maxwell, a pastor in Raymond who leads an affluent congregation. After a homeless man interrupts a Sunday service to admonish the congregation's complacency, Maxwell exhorts his congregation to live their lives "as Jesus would" for one year. The rest of the book follows twelve congregants in their struggles to do so. The book's subtitle—*What Would Jesus Do?*—provides the maxim through which the social gospel can be fulfilled. Above all else, Sheldon's social gospel message encouraged people to reconsider their conception of how society should operate and their personal motivations for behavior. Unquestionably, *In His Steps* was the most popular within its genre. Circulation alone should place Sheldon among the definitive voices of the social gospel movement, yet historians still struggle to explain the novel's success and the author's contribution to the social gospel.

One of the reasons historians have avoided placing Sheldon in conversation with social gospel voices is that *In His Steps* is generally considered a sentimental novel. This interpretation, however, ignores Sheldon's commitment to social Christian theology, investment in social reform, and conception of "*What would Jesus do?*" as a tool for social action. As a result, this thesis will situate Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon and his bestselling novel within the social gospel movement. This thesis will discuss Sheldon's relationship to other social gospel leaders and *In His Steps'* relationship to other social gospel messages. I will argue that Sheldon and *In His Steps* challenge conventional notions of the social gospel movement and its leaders. By considering Sheldon and *In His Steps* as a part of the social gospel, disparate social, moral, and political emphases become centralized in one figure and one work.

Traditionally, the social gospel is understood according to a handful of leaders including Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Francis Peabody, and Josiah Strong. Despite the diversity of thought among these leaders, historians generally turn to Rauschenbusch to define the movement. In the process, Rauschenbusch's description of the Kingdom of God often overshadows his concern for the individual's role in achieving social justice. In doing so, the social gospel's interest in social justice becomes overstated at the expense of its interest in individual middle class responsibility. Sheldon, however, demonstrates a clear interest in both

corporate and individual roles in society and both are clearly expressed in *In His Steps*. Sheldon hoped *In His Steps* would inspire a corporate response based on individual transformation. By bringing Sheldon and *In His Steps* to the center of the movement, these dual emphases are more balanced than with any other figure or any other piece of literature. Furthermore, Sheldon maintained the centrality of Jesus to understanding social problems and the importance of personal piety through the question “What would Jesus do?” The use of Jesus as a moral authority was not particular to Sheldon, but Sheldon’s novel provides the simplest and most mainstream explanation of how the person of Jesus was used by social gospellers. The history of liberal Protestant thought in general and social gospel concerns in particular can be summed up with this phrase.

Additionally, “What would Jesus do?” demonstrates the hope that Sheldon and other social gospellers had toward creating a more perfect society. Like Washington Gladden, for instance, Sheldon was interested in both “perfect men” and “perfect society.” Unlike Gladden who focused more exclusively individual character, Sheldon found the most practical method in combining these two interests. Sheldon supplied a practical and popular method of perfecting society through individuals changing their own behavior. This is not to say that Sheldon was only interested in individual responses to social ills but rather than Sheldon recognized the individual was key to the social changes that could bring the Kingdom of God. What balances the individual and social responsibilities not least of all is the reader’s liberty to interpret the message “What would Jesus do?” While “What would Jesus do?” was intended for ubiquitous application, Sheldon reiterated the individual’s ability to answer the question according to their situation. In this way, Sheldon and *In His Steps* allows for Francis Peabody’s “occasional” Jesus, who made moral decisions on a case-by-case basis, while also encouraging systematic application. Readers’ application of “What would Jesus do?” was specific to their situation, as Peabody insisted, while also creating a standard social response where other social gospellers did not.

More importantly, the nation responded by making *In His Steps* the most popular social gospel novel, not to mention one of the best selling books of all time. It is because Sheldon was popular that historians’ eschewal of his relevance and significance in the social gospel movement is so surprising. *In His Steps* condenses a variety of social gospel thought into one phrase that captures the spirit of the entire movement. In essence, Sheldon bridged the gap between Jesus

and the individual in a way other social gospelers did not. Sheldon made Jesus as a moral authority more accessible and applicable to the masses, and the middle-class responded overwhelmingly. Presenting the social gospel in such a way that was believed to transform society without restructuring it, *In His Steps* found a middle ground for a movement that expressed a variety of opinions on the best solution to creating a more perfect society.

In addition to *In His Steps* uniting broad social gospel trends and themes, Sheldon's career echoes the experiences of other social gospel leaders. For example, Sheldon was committed to modern sciences and convinced that it and Christianity were not in opposition to each other. Sheldon immersed himself in sociology, advocating that every good pastor studied the society in which he served. In fact, Sheldon's first few weeks in Topeka, Kansas were spent shadowing several different social groups including, businessmen, college students, newspaper reporters, and African American "Exodusters." Sheldon's studies of various social groups were not in vain, but formed the basis of his lifelong commitment to improving the lives of African Americans in Topeka. Sheldon's personal commitment and public affirmations of science illustrate the general trend among liberal Protestants at the turn of the twentieth century.

Like other social gospel leaders, Sheldon's social gospel messages directly related to his personal experiences in the city he was in. Just as Hells Kitchen affected Rauschenbusch so too did Tennesseetown, the Exoduster community in Topeka, affect Sheldon. In *In His Steps*, for example, the fictional slum and fictional minister's interest in his congregants serving in a slum paralleled Sheldon and his interest in others serving in Tennesseetown. In this way, Sheldon resembles other social gospel ministers who reconsider the gospel and its role in society based on their confrontations with social issues. What is different about Sheldon was his method of encouraging others to re-consider the role of the church and individual in society. Sheldon was not interested in re-defining Christianity or liberal Protestant doctrine even though he was interested in transforming social Christian action. In this respect, Sheldon's intended audience continued to be his congregation. Sheldon explained in the preface to *In His Steps* that the novel began as a "sermon story" for his local congregation and "read a chapter at a time to his Sunday evening congregation."<sup>1</sup> While Rauschenbusch and others engaged other liberal Protestant elite, Sheldon reached out to his congregation and, in the process, engaged the masses.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1897) np.

Since he was writing to a local audience and intending for them to apply his message, Sheldon complicates the notion that the social gospel was purely an intellectual movement. Sheldon's non-intellectual approach emphasized action over abstract thought or doctrinal minutia. It is this focus that has allowed historians to dismiss Sheldon as trite novelist. In effect, however, Sheldon mainstreamed the social gospel. Sheldon condensed social gospel thought in such a way that could be consumed by middle class Christians. In spite of Sheldon's middlebrow appeal, we must not lose sight of the fact that Sheldon graduated from Andover Seminary. Too easily, historians, ethicists, and literary critics overlook Sheldon's training at an institution that served as a catalyst for liberal Christian thought. Sheldon and his work in Topeka, Kansas offers one way to recognize that the social gospel was not just an urban phenomenon. Topeka's urbanization was no where near the development of Chicago, New York or other urban centers yet Topeka still coped with similar issues as those urban centers. In this way, Sheldon's career can both illustrate prevailing notions of social gospel leaders while also challenging this consensus.

Although Sheldon's experiences echo those of other social gospel leaders, Sheldon offers new insights into who was a social gospel leader, where the social gospel occurred, and how far its influences reached. Examinations of Sheldon's career not only illustrate parallels with other social gospel leaders but also reveal oversights in social gospel historiography. Above all else, Charles Sheldon and his novel, *In His Steps*, was where social gospel thought and social gospel action met. When Sheldon becomes the focal point of the social gospel movement, the social gospel principles of Rauschenbusch, Gladden, Peabody, and Strong are clarified. Rather than being relegated to outside the movement, Sheldon and *In His Steps* serve as a useful model for understanding the social gospel. Sheldon and *In His Steps* expressed the central doctrine of the movement, represented the variety of thought in the movement, and outlined the boundaries of the ideals and ethic. *In His Steps* not only sums up the central tenets of the social gospel but also provides an anchor the social gospel movement. After all, the social gospel was fulfilled only go as far as the Church interpreted "What would Jesus do?"

#### Contribution to Scholarship

I intend to further the scholarship on Sheldon by placing him in conversation with other social gospel thinkers. In doing so, I hope to broaden historical understanding of social gospel

movements to include (non-theological) figures like Sheldon and (less urbanized) places like Kansas. The historiography of the social gospel has stifled a movement that was more fluid than is typically considered. By bringing Sheldon fully into the social gospel movement, the historiography can maintain its urban, industrial, intellectual core while also allowing for less acknowledged areas of the social gospel like frontier, rural, middle-brow reformers and reform movements. Furthermore, Sheldon provides the best perspective on the social gospel history and historiography because the phrase and concept driving *In His Steps* mainstreamed the social gospel. To avoid the popularity of *In His Steps* or the centrality of “What would Jesus do?” to the social gospel would ignore the heart of the social gospel movement.

When scholars address Sheldon and *In His Steps*, they too often focus on how Sheldon spread the social gospel message and not the content of that message. In particular, many scholars focus on Sheldon as a social gospel novelist only.<sup>2</sup> The problem with this approach is that historians and literary critics often confuse Sheldon’s medium with his message. Sheldon’s message was rooted in social gospel thought while his medium was a sentimental novel. Sheldon use of the novel was a pragmatic decision for the purposes of capturing the attention of his congregation. His decision proved successful as the congregation grew and millions of books sold. Similarly, others focus on the most sensational aspect of Sheldon’s career, his work with the press.<sup>3</sup> While Sheldon’s “Jesus newspaper” was significant, it was not the pinnacle of his career nor his only accomplishment. As Sheldon’s biographer Timothy Miller points out, Sheldon was involved in many reform movements, especially those that involved Tennesseetown. Where Miller demonstrated that Sheldon was an authentic social gospel

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<sup>2</sup> See: John P. Ferré, *A Social Gospel for Millions: The Religious Bestsellers of Charles Sheldon*, Charles Gordon, and Harold Bell Wright (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988); William C. Graham, *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature* (Lanham Maryland: University Press of America, 1995); Thomas E. Jenkins, *The Character of God: Recovering the Lost Literary Power of American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Roger Lundin, *There before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007); Grier Nicholl, "The Image of the Protestant Minister in the Christian Social Novel," *Church History* 37 (1968): 319-334; David S. Reynolds, "From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America." *American Quarterly* 32 (1980): 479-498; Charles Yrigoyen, *Charles Sheldon: Christian Social Novelist* (Reading, PA: Albright College, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Michael Ray Smith, *The Jesus Newspaper: The Christian Experiment of 1900 and Its Lessons for Today* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002) and Billie Barnes Jensen, “A Social Gospel Experiment in Newspaper Reform: Charles M Sheldon and the Topeka Daily Capital.” *Church History* 33 (1964): 74-83.

reformer—true to his word and understanding of Christianity—he did not, however, demonstrate how Sheldon was similar to other social gospel thinkers or leaders. Likewise, other scholars focus on the revitalization of “What Would Jesus Do” in more modern evangelical circles.<sup>4</sup> This is interesting and important scholarship because it demonstrates Sheldon’s enduring impact; however, it reiterates historiographical errors that remove Sheldon from the social gospel mainstream. Rather than continue the historiographical trend in partitioning Sheldon and his novel away from social gospel leaders, I will situate Sheldon within the social gospel movement. In doing so, I will demonstrate that once Sheldon is taken seriously as a social gospel figure (as opposed to a historical anomaly), conventional notions of the social gospel movement must be reconsidered. Therefore, this thesis contributes to scholarship by expanding the historiography of the social gospel to include an overlooked yet critical figure and novel of the social gospel movement.

#### Method and Chapter Summary

Using both primary and secondary sources, I plan to situate Sheldon within the social gospel in relation to his contemporaries and according to historical understanding of the movement. The thesis will be organized thematically with respect to *In His Steps* as a social gospel medium and message and Sheldon as a social gospel thinker and leader. The thesis will be divided into three chapters.

First, I will examine the historiography of the social gospel with particular attention to how Sheldon has or has not been incorporated. This will require an immersion in secondary literature that addresses the social gospel and its leaders as well as literature about social Christian novels. Including secondary literature about social Christian novels is key because Sheldon is often portrayed as a novelist as opposed to a social gospeler. By understanding how the social gospel and Sheldon have been portrayed, I can better explain how focusing on Sheldon requires a turn in social gospel historiography, the subject of the next two chapters.

In the second chapter, I will examine *In His Steps* as both a social gospel medium and message. Although the plot and message are simple, the reasons for *In His Steps*’ influence and enduring success are complex. As a result, I will focus on “What would Jesus do?” as a social

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<sup>4</sup> Young-Hoon Yoon, *What Would Jesus Do?: Charles Sheldon’s Legacy and American Evangelicalism* [Dissertation] (Madison, NJ: Drew University, 2006).

gospel message and the “sermon-story” novel as a vehicle for the social gospel. In light of the historiography, I will explain how *In His Steps* is often dismissed as a representation of social gospel thought because of its form and why it should be embraced instead. Most notably, its condensed social gospel theology, simple social application, and popularity are reasons why *In His Steps* offers the most succinct explanation of the social gospel. Also, I will discuss the tensions between progressive and conservative influences to offer insights as to why it is representative of the social gospel message. While Sheldon’s emphasis on the individual is generally used as a demonstration of its conservative influences, *In His Steps* more aptly expresses the role of the individual found in many social gospelers work, including Rauschenbusch. Examining this tension between social and individual responsibility in *In His Steps* is especially key since this same tension is central to understanding the social gospel at large.

In the third chapter, I will focus on Sheldon as a social gospel activist. Although Sheldon is best known for *In His Steps*, his entire career was devoted to social reform. Like many other social gospel thinkers, Sheldon’s first-hand experience with poverty inspired his own work. Specifically, Sheldon devoted much of his time to establishing a kindergarten for African Americans living in Tennesseetown in Topeka. Sermon-stories like *In His Steps* were simply the method Sheldon used to inspire social action by his congregants. I will demonstrate how Sheldon’s career echoes the careers of other social gospel leaders while also offering overlooked trends in social gospel leadership. In this way Sheldon represents conventional social gospel leaders while also providing inroads to under-researched areas of social gospel influences, particularly middle-class, non-intellectual influences.

## CHAPTER 1

### CHARLES M. SHELDON AND THE HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT: WHAT WILL HISTORIANS DO?

Much of the social gospel movement<sup>5</sup> remains an enigma. Although many historians agree that the social gospel occurred during a turbulent period of Protestantism in America, few agree on the details of the movement, including when it began, when it ended as well as its breadth and depth within American Protestant Christianity.<sup>6</sup> This uncertainty is the result of early historical studies that narrowly focused on elite white men in the North and more recent studies intending to recover and reorient history according to a variety of perspectives. As a figure that the historiography explains as both a “great man” and a “lost voice,” Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon provides a unique perspective on the history and historiography of the social gospel movement. Sheldon and the way in which historians categorize and describe him reveals much about what historians think of the social gospel, what they want it to be, what they do not want it to be, and what it might have been. Though methodologies have changed over time, historians consistently place Sheldon on the periphery of the social gospel movement and social-Christian fiction to maintain a narrowly defined social gospel movement known for its intellectual legitimacy. When Sheldon’s most famous novel and his career are examined more

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<sup>5</sup> For this chapter and the following chapters, “social gospel” and “social gospel movement” will not be capitalized. I do so for two reasons. First, historians lack a consensus on when the social gospel movement occurred for it to be considered an event or period of time. Capitalizing “social gospel” misrepresents the ongoing dialogue among historians. Second, I want to acknowledge that the movement may have contained a multiplicity of religious impulses not readily identifiable with a capitalized “social gospel.”

<sup>6</sup> Historians, like Ralph Luker, argue that the social gospel was borne out of antebellum voluntary organizations while others consider it to have begun in the 1880s with the turn toward liberal Protestantism. Likewise, historians disagree about the end to the social gospel. Some say Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal ended the social gospel, others say World War I, and still others say it never ended. As for its breadth and depth, this historical debate centers on its liberal and conservative connections as well as its popularity among Christians. I argue in later chapters that the social gospel’s breadth and depth depends largely on how historians treat Sheldon and his social gospel fiction. If Sheldon is central to the social gospel, then the movement was broad and far reaching. Similarly, if Sheldon is considered at the center of the movement, then many historians have overstated its liberal, non-evangelical tendencies.

closely it becomes clearer that historians and literary critics marginalized Sheldon in order to deliberately protect theology and sophisticated literature.

Influenced by reexaminations of liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and the New Deal, historians first wrote consensus histories of the social gospel. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing well into the 1960s, historians considered and “re-considered” the cause, methods, and effect of the social gospel, social Christianity, and Protestantism-led reform. These histories include: Charles Howard Hopkins’ *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (1940), Fredrick Johnson’s *The Social Gospel Re-Examined* (1940), Henry May’s *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (1949), Paul Allen Carter’s *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel, Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940* (1954), Aaron Abell’s *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism, 1865-1900* (1961), Robert Handy’s *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (1966), and William McKee’s *The Social Gospel and the New Social Order, 1919-1929* (1967). Each of these over-arching studies of the social gospel established Sheldon as a peripheral figure. Ironically, Sheldon’s peripheral status resulted from the popularity of *In His Steps*. Though Protestants responded to this social gospel novel en masse, consensus-model historians implied, its popularity as fiction demonstrated its shortcomings as an intellectual expression of the social gospel.

Of these consensus histories, Hopkins’ *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* remains a benchmark in the study of the social gospel. Hopkins supplied the opening statements in a conversation about, among other things, the significance of industrialization, urbanization, modernity and the “Americanness” of such causes and effects. Hopkins asserted that the social gospel was “American Protestantism’s response to the challenge of modern industrial society.”<sup>7</sup> In its relationship to industrialization, the social gospel was, according to Hopkins, limited to “a minority of Protestant leaders” who attempted to “reorient the historic faith of America.”<sup>8</sup> For Hopkins, these leaders were white, elite clergy whose ministries or education occurred primarily in the North. Moreover, Hopkins understood the social gospel as the result of a steady development in social Christian thought beginning with the Reconstruction. Each decade after 1880, according to Hopkins, experienced a refinement in the

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) 318.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Christian message to American society. As a result, Hopkins considered the movement “mature” at the turn of the twentieth-century. The movement reached maturity, Hopkins implied, because Walter Rauschenbusch properly outlined its theology.<sup>9</sup> With its own theology the social gospel then received “recognition.” This interpretation of the social gospel presented the social gospel as an esoteric movement of white elite men who improved upon the equally esoteric ideas of their predecessors.

What makes Hopkins crucial to this historiography of the social gospel not only is his definitive explanations of the movement but also his treatment of Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon as a key figure. Sheldon reached unprecedented popularity near the end of the nineteenth-century with his most famous novel, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hopkins included a section on social gospel literature in general and Sheldon in particular within his history of the movement. Hopkins asserted that “great causes have almost invariably produced a popular propagandist literature, and to this rule American social Christianity was no exception.”<sup>10</sup> In this “avalanche of fiction dramatizing the claims of the social gospel,” Hopkins recognized Sheldon’s *In His Steps* as “the most successful of these novels.”<sup>11</sup> Hopkins considered Sheldon’s work so successful that he equated *In His Steps* to “the greatest American tracts,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*.<sup>12</sup> Although Hopkins remained complimentary of Sheldon, he established Sheldon as a figure who merely “propagandized” and “dramatized” the social gospel rather than as an intellectual contributor to the movement. Furthermore, Hopkins thought Sheldon’s novels illustrated the sentimental and naïve character of the early social gospel, particularly its interest in applying the “law of love to society.”<sup>13</sup> Through this conception of social gospelers, Hopkins suggested a contrast between a sentimental-utopian, lay-driven social gospel and a more intellectually rigorous, elite-inspired

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<sup>9</sup> The fourth part of Hopkins’ book is titled, “Maturity and Recognition.” The second chapter of this section is titled “Walter Rauschenbusch Formulates the Social Gospel.” See Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel*, 201-317, 215-232.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 140

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 325. In contrast, Hopkins conceptualized other social gospel leaders, like Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch and George Herron as more closely expressing the social gospel goal of justice. (See Hopkins 325-326).

social gospel. In so doing, Hopkins offered an intellectually rigorous and theologically cogent social gospel that could stand up to neo-orthodoxy. What Hopkins ignored is that Sheldon's activism, in addition to his novels, paralleled the development of the "intellectual" social gospel figures like Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Josiah Strong.

At the same time that Hopkins described *In His Steps* as an illustration of the quintessential Protestant ideology at the end of the century,<sup>14</sup> he refused to validate fiction—and Sheldon's fiction in particular—as an authentic expression of religious conviction. According to Hopkins, social gospel novels were "evidence of an approaching maturity in the life of the movement" because they "sounded a critical note" but, he implied, did not fully reform.<sup>15</sup> Hopkins' disapproval of fiction and protection of theology surfaced when he defended George D. Herron's status as a radical within the social gospel movement. Hopkins summed up Herron's thoughts as "the law of self-sacrifice asserted in Christ is the law of life: it is the message of Jesus to every man, but especially to the wealthy because theirs are the larger opportunities and possessions to sacrifice."<sup>16</sup> Although Sheldon's work consistently reflected this sentiment, Hopkins referred to Sheldon's answers to the social questions of the age as "panaceas" with a "utopian character."<sup>17</sup> Herron, in contrast, made "a highly spiritualized appeal for religious social reform" that offered "the political appearing of Christ"—a religious theory of the nature and purpose of the social state."<sup>18</sup> Even though "Herron's message held no practical concern for specific remedies," Hopkins considered Herron a legitimate reformer because "[Herron's] version of the social gospel appears to have been a deeply religious interpretation of the contemporary social revolt, phrased by a prophetic genius of tremendous spiritual dynamic."<sup>19</sup> In other words, Heron deserves recognition as a social gospel prophet because his message was theological while Sheldon's was not. Hopkins drew such sharp boundaries between Sheldon and Herron because, in his mind, there exists a sharp boundary between fiction and theology.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 140, 148.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 148, 325.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 188-189.

Parallel to this developing history of the social gospel was a narrower history of popular novels and story writing within Christianity. As the author of one of the nineteenth-century's most popular novels, Sheldon could not be ignored as a principal figure; yet, literature critics and historians contested Sheldon's position in this history. In the 1940s, Alice Payne Hackett and Frank Luther Mott published competing and conflicting lists of the nation's best-selling novels.<sup>20</sup> Writing about literature rather than history, Hackett and Mott focused exclusively on the sales and artistic quality of *In His Steps*. Although Hackett established *In His Steps* as a singularly popular novel, Mott argued that *In His Steps* was immaterial because of Sheldon's amateurish prose and simplistic vision for reform. Hackett and Mott essentially differed in what constituted a "best-seller." For Hackett, sales alone determined what novels Americans consider to be "best-sellers." Consequently, many literary critics were surprised that *In His Steps*, a popular yet artless novel, made Hackett's list. Mott in particular insisted that the quality of artistic expression matters, while also rejecting Hackett's calculations, in his own commentary on Sheldon two years later. The debate between Hackett and Mott over Sheldon's contributions as a novelist set a long-standing trend of scholars debating *In His Steps*' sales, prose, and worth. These assessments essentially made such topics prerequisites for future studies relating to Sheldon, setting a standard dichotomy between those who endorse sales numbers or artistic expression as the essence to *In His Steps*' value.

While Hackett and Mott considered the merit of *In His Steps*, historian James D. Hart attempted to explain its popularity.<sup>21</sup> Hart determined that "the truly popular religious novel must suit people of many churches by being essentially non-denominational. It has to be palatable to the Protestant middle class, which comprises the great American public, but it must also appeal to those who were not born into a Protestant church or who have long since left it. If faith attracts some of the readers, frustration and general world-weariness drive others to the book."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Sheldon's success was the result of "employ[ing] a simple statement of ideas that

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<sup>20</sup> See Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1945) and Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> James D. Hart, "Platitudes of Piety: Religion and the Popular Modern Novel," *American Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1954): 311-322.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

more serious thinkers had worked with, say fifty years earlier, while the present-day religious novel is likely to make a naïve use of the rudiments of Freudian psychology that a more knowing public had absorbed in the 1920's."<sup>23</sup> According to Hart, Sheldon's fame was the result of "popular" universally Christian prattle. In contrast to Hart, however, a few articles explained the significance of Sheldon's *In His Steps*. Not surprisingly, these favorable articles are found in a seventieth anniversary edition printing of *In His Steps*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, with the exception of those catering to Sheldon's readers, scholars understood Sheldon and *In His Steps* to be not only tangential to the social gospel movement, but inconsequential because of his popularity.

Beginning roughly in the 1960s as social consciousness intensified, social gospel scholarship turned toward specific leaders and their contributions to the movement. This includes a number of articles and biographies on Josiah Strong, Francis Peabody, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch.<sup>25</sup> These works either examined each figures' social gospel message or expanded knowledge of their careers. Among this set of historiographical works were two on Sheldon. Billie Jean Jensen (1964) and John W. Ripley (1965) published accounts of Sheldon's newspaper "experiment," expanding works on Sheldon to include one project outside *In His Steps*.<sup>26</sup> Jensen explained that though Sheldon intended to initiate 'a reform in journalism' he actually fell prey to media advertising when he edited the *Topeka Daily Capital* for one week.<sup>27</sup> As with his *In His Steps*, Jensen concluded, publishing and advertising techniques overshadowed Sheldon's hope to demonstrate social gospel principles. Although Sheldon created an unprecedented and widely circulated newspaper edition, its success lay more in "advertising

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>24</sup> John W. Ripley and Robert W. Richmond, eds. *In His Steps: "What would Jesus do?"* [70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition] (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> For examples see: Barton J. Bernstein, "Francis Greenwood Peabody: Conservative Social Reformer," *The New England Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (September 1963): 320-337; Jacob Henry Dorn, *Washington Gladden: Prophet of the Social Gospel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968); Benson Y. Landis, *A Rauschenbusch Reader*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957); Dorothea R. Muller, "The Social Philosophy of Josiah Strong: Social Christianity and American Progressivism," *Church History* 28, no. 2 (June 1959): 183-201.

<sup>26</sup> Billie Barnes Jensen, "A Social Gospel Experiment in Newspaper Reform: Charles M. Sheldon and the *Topeka Daily Capital*," *Church History* 33, no. 1 (March 1964): 74-83; John W. Ripley, "Another look at the Rev. Mr. Charles M. Sheldon's Christian daily newspaper," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1965): 1-40.

<sup>27</sup> Jensen, 77.

genius” because “Sheldon had again been duped by members of the publishing world.”<sup>28</sup> These studies on Sheldon followed the general trend within the social gospel’s historiography. They also demonstrate the problems embedded in this shift. Both present Sheldon as a well-intentioned yet naïve preacher who succeeded as a result of others’ business acumen. While scholars may have gained a clearer portrait of Sheldon, they neglected the larger context. Overall, expertise about particular social gospellers deepened but failed to broaden. By writing works about specific people without contextualization to the broader movement, historians essentialized figures like Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Josiah Strong and moved figures like Sheldon further into a liminal space.

In the 1970s, as the prominence of liberal Protestants within the academy declined, historians examined the social gospel historiography with an increasingly critical eye. For instance, historians George Marsden (1973) and Dale Johnson (1973) considered the role evangelism played in the social gospel.<sup>29</sup> Above all else, Marsden and Johnson challenged the earlier consensus histories that agreed the social gospel was a liberal-Protestant movement only. Both encouraged scholarship that recovered evangelical voices and revealed the fluidity of categories like “evangelical” and “liberal” in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Working in the same vein, historian Philip Jordan offered an example of a more conservative social gospel with “Immigrants, Methodists and a ‘Conservative’ Social Gospel, 1865-1908” (1978).<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as historians assessed the breadth and complexity of the movement, historian William Hutchinson challenged Hopkins’ assertion of the “Americanness” of the social gospel, concluding that it was not indigenous though it had its “peculiar” aspects.<sup>31</sup> Slowly but surely, the historiography began to question assumptions made by the earliest historians. The social gospel movement began to look less liberal Protestant, less American, less urban, less

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<sup>28</sup> Jensen, 82.

<sup>29</sup> George Marsden, “The Gospel of Wealth, the Social Gospel, and the Salvation of Souls in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Fides et historia: Official Publication of the Conference on Faith and History* 5, no. 1 (1973): 10-21; Dale A. Johnson, “Between Evangelicalism and a Social Gospel: The Case of Joseph Rayner Stephens,” *Church History* 42, no. 2 (June 1973): 229-242.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Jordan, “Immigrants, Methodists and a ‘Conservative’ Social Gospel, 1865-1908,” *Methodist History* 17, no. 1 (1978): 16-43.

<sup>31</sup> William R. Hutchinson, “The Americanness of the Social Gospel: An Inquiry in Comparative History,” *Church History* 44, no. 3 (1975): 367-381.

isolated to the Northeast, and less white. The most influential of these critiques were Ronald White and Charles Howard Hopkins' *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (1976) and Ralph Luker's "The Social Gospel and the Failure of Racial Reform, 1877-present."<sup>32</sup>

In 1976, White and Hopkins offered a critical response to social gospel historiography to "restate and re-vision the social gospel."<sup>33</sup> Part of this revision by White and Hopkins included understanding the social gospel as a movement of social consciousness that extended into the 1960s. In order to persuade readers to re-vision the social gospel, White and Hopkins offered four questions that challenged contradictions embedded in the historiography: "Is the social gospel chiefly a response to external events, or is it rather the expression of the internal continuity of aggressive American religion? How did the social gospellers understand the new urban world? To what extent is the social gospel a theological movement and what is its theology? What were the points of connection and tension (if any) between the social gospel movement and the larger progressive movement?"<sup>34</sup> These questions continue to direct the course of social gospel studies.

Despite their challenges, however, White and Hopkins offered no new perspective on Sheldon. In fact, the commentary following an excerpt from *In His Steps* was merely a reprinting of Hopkins' original analysis from *The Rise of the Social Gospel*.<sup>35</sup> Consistent with this earlier work, White and Hopkins recognized Sheldon as the only fictional writer to make the social gospel reach an unprecedented audience.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, White and Hopkins include *In His Steps* because it represents an "expression of the social gospel ideas in popular form."<sup>37</sup> With this assessment, Sheldon is not a distinctive figure and *In His Steps* is not a unique expression; instead, both are lesser versions of a more sophisticated social gospel. The failure to re-consider Sheldon or *In His Steps* is most surprising because both illustrate many of the tensions White and

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Temple University Press, 1976); Ralph Luker, "The Social Gospel and the Failure of Racial Reform, 1877-present," *Church History* 46, no. 1 (1977): 80-99.

<sup>33</sup> White and Hopkins, xi.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi-xviii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146; Hopkins, 143-144.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Hopkins hope to illuminate including the social gospel's connection with revivalism, the new theology fostered at Andover, as well as the balance of individual and collective responsibilities for ethical behavior. Nevertheless, White and Hopkins repeated the consensus of previous historians that placed Sheldon on the periphery of the social gospel movement. More subtly, White and Hopkins re-iterated the assumption that there were more important figures and literature worth discussing. Ironically, White and Hopkins's theses would have been better served with a fuller treatment of Sheldon, but their unwillingness to take fiction seriously prevented this insight.

In addition to White and Hopkins, historian Ralph Luker initiated a monumental shift in the historiography by examining the role of race in the social gospel movement. In his essay, "The Social Gospel and the Failure of Racial Reform, 1877-1898," Luker argued that the social gospel grew out of antebellum voluntary associations and its desire to establish a structurally and culturally coherent society based on their Protestant beliefs.<sup>38</sup> The cultural imperialism of these social Christians, according to Luker, should not be confused with racism. In a discussion of the historiography, Luker asserted that in the 1960s historians condemned social gospelers for their lack of a role in ameliorating race relations. Luker argued that this interpretation is contingent upon the idea that major social gospel figures like Josiah Strong, Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Lyman Abbott were racist. Luker also argued that this assertion also relies on the premise that nineteenth century reforms were discrete incidents throughout the century rather than a developing and continuous trajectory of thought.<sup>39</sup> Not to mention, these notions rely on the origin of the social gospel being related to urban-industrial crises only. Luker explained that "prior to the organization of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, the [American Missionary Association] may have been the single most important agency of the social gospel in American Protestantism."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Luker listed Sheldon as being among the key figures involved in the American Missionary Association.<sup>41</sup> For Luker, much of the social

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<sup>38</sup> See Ralph Luker, "The Social Gospel and the Failure of Racial Reform, 1877-present," *Church History* 46 (1977):80-81.

<sup>39</sup> This challenge is consistent with White and Hopkins' critique of the stimulus-response model of earlier historians.

<sup>40</sup> Luker, 84-85.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

gospel historiography was wrapped up in liberally minded missionaries moving from the East to the West to establish their vision for Protestant Christianity. Unlike White and Hopkins, Luker both challenged the historiography and offered an alternative view of the social gospel movement; however, just as with White and Hopkins, Sheldon exemplifies Luker's paradigm although he receives only a brief mention.

As historians like White, Hopkins, and Luker, challenged the historiography of the social gospel others challenged conventional understandings of Sheldon. Paul Boyer, for example, challenged literary critics like Mott and historians like Hopkins in his influential 1971 "reappraisal" of *In His Steps*.<sup>42</sup> Boyer asserted that *In His Steps*' contribution to the nineteenth-century was, above all else, the "emotional profile" assigned to the middle-class.<sup>43</sup> Boyer further argued that *In His Steps* is significant not because it is a social protest or a optimistic utopian worldview, but because it elucidates "middle-class perceptions of the working class and on middle-class self-perception."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in 1975 historian Wayne Elzey concluded that the novel's subtitle, "What would Jesus do," offered a new cosmology that catered to the middle class by maintaining a "coherent universe" in spite of social problems. Elzey further asserted that "What would Jesus do" glorified the middle class by transforming Jesus into a middle-class American.<sup>45</sup> Criticizing Mott's characterization of *In His Steps* as a simplistic novel, Elzey asserted, like Boyer, that the novel serves as a window into the nineteenth-century middle-class mind. Popularity in particular, Elzey insisted, makes *In His Steps* key for understanding the nineteenth-century. Moreover, Elzey deduced that Sheldon became open to criticism because "what the popular mind proposes, the sophisticated mind disposes."<sup>46</sup> When it comes to the larger American religious history historiographical debate, Elzey and Boyer alone classify *In His Steps* as an authentic "intellectual" work. This classification by Boyer and Elzey lent much needed legitimacy to Sheldon and *In His Steps*. Above all else, Boyer and Elzey granted Sheldon and *In His Steps* historical legitimacy because they did not confuse Sheldon's popularity for

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<sup>42</sup> Paul S. Boyer, "In His Steps: A Reappraisal," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 60-78.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Wayne Elzey, "What Would Jesus Do: In His Steps and the Moral Codes of the Middle Class," *Soundings* 58, no. 4 (1975): 463-489.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

superficiality nor did they preference theology over fiction. They did, however, equate middle-class religiosity with condescension. “Real” religion, then, remains intellectually-rigorous and properly theologically minded rather than popularly practiced or related to the mundane.

Based on the critical responses in the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s became a prolific period for historians interested in social Christianity, the social gospel, and Protestant-led reform. The field experienced an explosion of works that addressed race, region, gender, and literature within the social gospel. For instance, William McGuire King published twin articles that expanded notions of social gospel thought. To understand the breadth of social gospel thought, King wrote about radicalism within the movement in 1981.<sup>47</sup> Despite of the consensus that the social gospel lacked a cogent theology, King’s “History as Revelation” (1983) asserted that a theological understanding of history provided the foundation for a social gospel theology.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to King, historian Thomas Graham explored more conservative social gospel efforts in rural areas.<sup>49</sup> These examinations of the social gospel, however, were not limited to its radical or conservative influences. New scholarship broadened the scope of the social gospel. For example, historians produced works that focused on a variety of aspects within the movement, such as studies on liberal ministers, social ethics, social Christianity, missionary efforts, and progressive culture generally.<sup>50</sup> Other scholars analyzed the movement through various “lenses.” For example, Janet Forsythe Fishburn analyzed the social gospel through a focus on the family in

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<sup>47</sup> William McGuire King, “The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism,” *Church History* 50, no. 4 (1981): 436-449.

<sup>48</sup> William McGuire King, ‘History As Revelation’ in the Theology of the Social Gospel. *The Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983.): 109-129.

<sup>49</sup> Jenkin Lloyd Jones and Thomas Graham, *The Agricultural Social Gospel in America: The Gospel of the Farm* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> For example, see: Robert Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Gary J. Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Carville Earle, “Pioneers of Providence: The Anglo-American Experience, 1492-1792,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992): 478-499; Richard Wightman Fox, “The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875-1925,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1989): 639-660.

*The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: the Social Gospel in America* (1981).<sup>51</sup> Within this wealth of social gospel literature, two works became new standards in the changing perspective on the social gospel: Ronald C. White's *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel, 1877-1925* (1990) and Ralph Luker's *The Social Gospel in Black and White American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (1991).<sup>52</sup>

Writing in the late 1980s with other “new” cultural historians, Ronald White Jr. and Ralph Luker's histories of the social gospel opened historical dialogue to the neglected topic of race and the social gospel. White and Luker corrected the misconception that social gospelers ignored the issue of race by exposing the historiography's error in concentrating primarily on the urban North. By expanding the social gospel movement outside the urban North, White and Luker stepped outside the boundary of “intellectual” history and social gospel thought to include the “lived” history of social gospel activism. This shift resulted from a desire to relate the social gospel to the Civil Rights Movement. In so doing, both White and Luker recovered Sheldon's role as a social gospel activist. Sheldon stood in contrast to many of his white contemporaries because he recognized that “there is no 'negro problem' any more than there is an 'Anglo-Saxon problem'... The only problem is the 'human problem.'”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, when Luker expanded the social gospel past the geographical region of the urban North and past the barrier of esoteric thought Sheldon's activism with African-Americans in Topeka fit within the development of the social gospel movement.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, White added much needed perspective on the merits of *In His Steps*, arguing “total sales do not calculate the influence of the book. *In His Steps* was the kind of book passed around from mother to grandfather to daughter.”<sup>55</sup> White also distilled the historiographical debate about *In His Steps*: “Sheldon, if he is recognized at all today, has often

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<sup>51</sup> Janet Forsythe Fishburn, *The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: The Social Gospel in America*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

<sup>52</sup> Ronald C. White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel (1877-1925)*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Luker, 121, Luker quotes Charles M. Sheldon, "The Kingdom," *Missionary Review of the World* 19 (June 1896): 470–71.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167. Luker explains the development of the social gospel from missions work to institutional churches and includes Topeka within a list of cities that exemplified this transition.

<sup>55</sup> White, 31.

been cast aside with the ultimate academic broadside: ‘popular’. To do so is to miss the meaning, sometimes more subtle than appears at first glance, in his writings.”<sup>56</sup> Restating Elzey’s contention that “what the popular mind proposes, the sophisticated mind disposes,” White refuted notions that Sheldon was a conservative-evangelical or a revivalist because he “ argue[d] again and again for an understanding of the corporate nature of evil and the need for a Social Gospel large enough to change systems, not just individuals.”<sup>57</sup> It was this corporate conception that animated much of Sheldon’s work among African-Americans, leading White to place Sheldon within the trajectory of the social gospel to the civil rights movement.

In addition to race, there was an exponential growth in studies that examined social-gospel and social-Christian novels, including: David S. Reynolds’ “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America” (1980), Susan Lindley’s “Women and the Social Gospel Novel” (1985), John P. Ferré’s *A Social Gospel for Millions: The Religious Bestsellers of Charles Sheldon, Charles Gordon, and Harold Bell Wright*, Robert Glenn Wright’s *The Social Christian Novel* (1989), Gary Scott Smith’s “Charles M. Sheldon’s *In His Steps* in the context of religion and culture in late nineteenth century America” (1990), William Graham’s *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature* (1995), Thomas Jenkins’ *The Character of God Recovering the Lost Literary Power of American Protestantism* (1997) . On the whole, these studies approached social-gospel novels positively and *In His Steps* negatively. Historians largely understood social gospel novels as “windows” into the nineteenth-century mind, critical pieces for contextualization. Based on these works, it is less clear where Sheldon and *In His Steps* belongs in the fray. Reynolds, for example, places *In His Steps* as the culmination of pulpit-storytelling that resulted from liberal-Unitarian and evangelist-revivalist influences. For Reynolds, pulpit-storytelling, especially Sheldon, sheds light on an integral part of American culture generally. In contrast to Reynolds, John P. Ferré viewed social gospel novels and story-telling as but one part of the nineteenth-century that must not be confused for the whole. Indicative of the historiography, these contrasting opinions reveal how pivotal a figure Sheldon is.

Historian Robert Glenn Wright, for example, unintentionally confirmed Sheldon’s decisive role in his definitive study of social Christian novels. Not only did Wright “document

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

the existence” of this genre, but he established the categories used to define the various types of social Christian novels.<sup>58</sup> Wright acknowledged the unprecedented nature of *In His Steps*’ popularity and addressed it accordingly. Wright went as far as to claim that Sheldon’s “uniqueness lay in the fact that he was the only major national leader within the social gospel movement who also used the novel as a means of presenting his views.”<sup>59</sup> Though this statement is not entirely accurate because other social gospellers, like Washington Gladden, also wrote fiction, Wright’s inclusion of Sheldon as a “major national leader” is important. While Wright commended Sheldon, he also made it clear that the worth of social Christian novels lie not in the degree of their popularity: “The popularity of some social Christian novels is only one—perhaps the least important—reason for remembering them. ... These novels were important for what they opposed and for the evils they helped expose.”<sup>60</sup> Considering Sheldon’s novel was the most popular of its time, Wright intended to put *In His Steps* in its “proper” place. More pointedly, Wright argued that though many consider Sheldon the epitome of social Christian novels his work is only one part of a larger spectrum of the genre and must be remembered as such.<sup>61</sup> Though he wrote the most popular novel of his genre, according to Wright, Sheldon belongs on the periphery of the both the social gospel movement and the social-gospel-novel genre because other novels better express the social gospel sentiment.

Though their conclusions might lead one to think otherwise, Wright and Ferré offered little comparison between novels like Sheldon’s and social gospel figures heralded by historians. Filling this void in *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature* (1995) William C. Graham asserted that social gospel novels were a critical yet tangential part to the movement. In his chapter on Sheldon, Graham began by stating “there is an important contrast between popular and academic work,” popular works, like Sheldon’s fictionalized sermons, reached more people while academic works, like Walter Rauschenbusch’s theologies, influenced

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<sup>58</sup> Quote by Robert H. Walker and Dewey D. Wallace, Jr. in their introduction to Wright’s book, xi. For Wright’s explanation of social Christian novel categories see p. 27-37. R. Glenn Wright, *The Social Christian Novel*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

fewer people.<sup>62</sup> Although Graham asserted that novels are “cultural reflections” that contributed to the development of the social gospel, Graham protected the status of theological works.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Graham presents the work of novelists as important but not equal to theological treatises. In addressing Sheldon’s work specifically, Graham carefully placed Sheldon within the movement. According to Graham, “Sheldon is more evangelical than a true Social Gospeler” who “is really a proponent of the more conservative Social Christianity.”<sup>64</sup> According to Graham, Sheldon is merely “sympathetic” to “some social gospel aims,” located on the fringe of the movement yet preparing a popular reception of those central to it.<sup>65</sup> Above all else, Graham asserted that “Sheldon influenced simple people and those who elected a simple approach to complex problems.”<sup>66</sup> Graham’s acerbic conclusion, however, is more the result of his preferences of theological works than of Sheldon’s “simplicity.” Furthermore, Graham subtly delineated the social gospel movement from imposters based solely on perceived intellectual rigor rather than conversion to a socially minded Christianity. In this way, Graham epitomizes the way in which both historians and literary scholars have attempted to insulate the social gospel. More importantly, Sheldon consistently appears to be the biggest threat to such understandings of the social gospel.

Recognizing these historiographical errors, historian Timothy Miller attempted to correct misconceptions about Sheldon through two crucial works: “Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift

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<sup>62</sup> William C. Graham, *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 49-50.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 51-53, 52.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. Graham goes on to describe social Christianity as “all attempts to find Christian solutions to social problems, and to provide alternatives to socialism.” (55) The difference from the social gospel being that “Social Gospel proponents wanted to restructure society, while their more conservative colleagues saw the rightness of existing institutions and did not advocate institutional change.” (56) Among other things, Graham ignores Sheldon’s interest in socialism and his self-identification as a socialist not to mention the evangelical nature of the social gospel and its historical development in relation to evangelism. Graham goes on to argue that “the value of Sheldon’s effort is that he popularly prepared fertile ground for a developing Social Gospel,” more specifically a social gospel found through the work of Walter Rauschenbusch (73-74). For Graham, Sheldon cannot be a social gospeler because he avoids “justice.” In contrast, Walter Rauschenbusch supplied the justice and “nuance” that Sheldon lacked.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

of Tennessee Town” (1986) and *Following in His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon* (1987).<sup>67</sup> First, Miller opened scholarship on Sheldon to include more than his famous novel and his work with the *Topeka Daily Capitol*. Miller provided the most thorough examination of Sheldon’s relationship to Tennesseetown, the Exoduster community in Topeka, Kansas. In so doing, Miller added much needed depth to Sheldon’s role as a social gospel activist by explaining, essentially, the trial-and-error process by which Sheldon actualized reform in Tennesseetown. In 1987, Miller continued this expanded study into Sheldon’s life with his biography of Sheldon. In this work, Miller presented the most comprehensive account of Sheldon’s life. Recounting Sheldon’s youth and education, Miller connected potential influences to Sheldon’s activism. With little evidence written by Sheldon himself, this was no easy task. Additionally, Miller’s treatment of Sheldon demonstrated the breadth of Sheldon’s interests including, prohibition, municipal reform, fiction writing, and socialism. What Miller did not do in this biography was place Sheldon within the social gospel movement. Essentially, Miller reflected the larger trend in which scholars do not fully address the significant role Sheldon played in a much wider historical drama. Though Miller perpetuated the historiographical void, he encouraged future scholars to take up the task. As a result, the historiography continues to lack a framework through which historians and literature critics can understand Sheldon’s role and legitimacy in the social gospel movement.

The most recent scholarship on the social gospel embraces the historiographical turns made in the 1980s, expanding the social gospel in various directions. Gary Scott Smith, for instance, fully applied the earlier turns within the historiography that called for a more inclusive social gospel. In *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880-1925* (2000), Smith featured a broad range of figures, including Sheldon, in order to project a varied and enduring social Christianity.<sup>68</sup> In 2001, Susan Curtis tested the methodological waters by

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<sup>67</sup> Timothy Miller, “Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift of Tennessee Town. *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (1986): 125-137; Timothy Miller, *Following in His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

<sup>68</sup> Gary Scott Smith, *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880-1925*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

viewing the social gospel as adopting the consumer culture it initially opposed.<sup>69</sup> Curtis considered the social gospel to be a broad movement that began with a coterie of Protestant men and women. Among the social gospel's accomplishments, Curtis listed changes in services offered by churches, production of a distinct body of literature, and development of new directions in Protestant thought, especially a focus away from the afterlife.<sup>70</sup> Curtis concluded that the most profound result of the social gospel movement was its eventual adoption of secular methods and market-based rhetoric. Although Curtis fully embraced Sheldon as a popular social gospel figure, she neglected the way in which *In His Steps* and its later manifestation in the "What would Jesus do" movement exemplify her assertion.

In 2003, Wendy Edwards and Carolyn Gifford continued the historiographical trend with their edited volume, *Gender and the Social Gospel*. With this work, Edwards and Gifford set the example for gendered studies of the social gospel by compiling essays that both recover women's voices in history and applies a gendered lens to accepted historical understandings of the social gospel. Within this volume is Susan Lindley's gendered critique of social gospel novels, "Gender and the Social Gospel Novel."<sup>71</sup> Lindley further legitimized the study of social gospel novels by lauding the way in which they expose issues of gender within the movement. Lindley found that social gospel novels written by men typically do not extend the effects of the social gospel to the home the way female writers do. With respect to Sheldon, Lindley asserted "to the degree that 'the' social gospel novel is identified with and confined to *In His Steps*, our understanding of the social gospel novel and the movement itself is the poorer."<sup>72</sup> Even though Lindley understands fiction to be a legitimate source of historical thought and action, she dismissed Sheldon because he represented the mainstream. At stake for Lindley is the recovery of women within the social gospel. As a result, Lindley posits the successful recovery of women from the social gospel record against the value of studying Sheldon, despite their shared social gospel method and medium.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture*, (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), xii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>71</sup> This piece was first an article in *Church History* in 1985. See Susan Hill Lindley, "Women and the Social Gospel Novel," *Church History* 54 (1985): 56-73.

<sup>72</sup> Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Sawrte Gifford, eds, *Gender and The Social Gospel*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 198.

Embracing the critiques in earlier scholarship, American studies scholar Erin Smith acknowledged the patriarchy found in Sheldon's novels yet affirmed the need to further study male social gospel novelists, especially Sheldon.<sup>73</sup> Smith affirmed, above all else, the richness of nineteenth-century print culture. Smith contended: "Literature in social gospel novels is not a self-contained, intertextual world of ideas, but a series of concrete transactions with the material world undertaken by readers who understood books and literacy differently than contemporary scholars do."<sup>74</sup> Moving beyond issues of sales and artistic merit, Smith analyzed what Sheldon as a particular window into nineteenth-century print culture. Smith, baffled by the continuation of Sheldon's famous phrase well into the twenty-first century, concluded that "*In His Steps* survived, because—unlike the theologically dense *Robert Elsmere* and *Inside of the Cup*—it fit so well into nineteenth-century evangelical print culture."<sup>75</sup> *In His Steps* is, for Smith, inferior to other novels because of its "theological emptiness." Smith contended that this emptiness "no doubt made it more appropriable by liberal and conservative Christians alike."<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, *In His Steps* is, for Smith, an imposter that only superficially represents the theological rigor of the social gospel. As "the religious expression of the Progressive movement" the social gospel remains, for Smith, a movement that requires theology. Sheldon and *In His Steps*, then, do not fully belong within the social gospel movement, despite the inclusion of other novels.

Sheldon remains a liminal figure despite the considerate steps scholars have taken to understand the social gospel. *In His Steps* lacks the intellectual rigor Smith found necessary for meaningful inquiries into social gospel thought in general and social gospel novels in particular. At the same time, Lindley considered *In His Steps* to distract from more worthwhile expressions of the social gospel. Although the historiographical methods and perspectives on the social gospel have changed, recent scholarship indicates little has changed in the historiographical treatment of Charles Sheldon and his most popular novel. In the most pivotal appraisal of the historiography, Susan Lindley challenged social gospel historians to consider the role of

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<sup>73</sup> Erin A. Smith, "What Would Jesus Do?: The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace," *Book History* 10 (2007): 193-221.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

Christian praxis as much as they consider the role of Christian thought.<sup>77</sup> Asking “what, in short, ‘counts’ as part of the movement,” Lindley criticized the narrowness of social gospel studies. Lindley called for historians to turn to the “neglected voices” in order to find how they interpreted and applied the social gospel. Although Lindley’s critique aimed to include primarily African-American and female voices, her assertion that “the whole question of the meaning and impact of the social gospel must be re-opened and re-evaluated” can also apply to Sheldon.<sup>78</sup> Lindley demonstrated how a narrowly defined social gospel movement distorts historical realities and contemporary perceptions. Lindley’s solution was to find and amplify “neglected voices” to re-define of the social gospel on their terms. More importantly, Lindley argued that historians must begin their own reorientation by valuing the practice of the social gospel as much, if not more than, the theories of the social gospel.

If “praxis...is at the heart of the social gospel” as Lindley exhorted, then historians must reconsider the role fiction, and Sheldon’s fiction in particular, within the social gospel. Even as historians learn more about Sheldon’s career as a minister and as a novelist his contribution to the social gospel movement continually fails to “count.” As our historical perception of the social gospel changes, Sheldon’s role remains the same despite his career embodying both the initial history and the critiques recent historians have made. The heart of this historiographical debate centers around deliberate protections of theology and reverence for sophisticated literature. These trends, however, undermine the historiography more than they explain social gospel thought and practice.

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Lindley, “Neglected Voices and Praxis in the Social Gospel,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (2001): 75-102.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

## CHAPTER 2

### IN HIS STEPS AND THE HEART OF SOCIAL GOSPEL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

In the summer of 1896 Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon started writing what was to become his most famous novel, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*.<sup>79</sup> Without a doubt, *In His Steps* was the most popular social Christian novel<sup>80</sup> of the nineteenth century selling at least twenty million copies worldwide within Sheldon's lifetime. The literary world was stunned in 1945, however, when Alice Payne Hackett listed *In His Steps* near the top of her *Fifty Years of Bestsellers, 1895-1945*. Two years later Frank Luther Mott published his own list of bestsellers in *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*. Rather than include *In His Steps* among his list of bestsellers, Mott devoted an entire chapter to explaining why *In His Steps* could not and should not be granted bestseller status.<sup>81</sup> In no uncertain terms, Mott asserted Sheldon's failure at artistic expression stating, "*In His Steps* is a naive *Robert Elsmere*, though with respect to literary art it is so far inferior to the earlier novel as to bear no comparison... it has little to commend it in characterization, setting, or plot."<sup>82</sup> What bothered Mott most was the contrast between Sheldon's failure as an artist and success as an author. After conducting his own research on Sheldon's sales figures, Mott repudiated Hackett for rewarding Sheldon based on inaccurate statistics. Since Mott, scholars have debated not only *In His Steps*' artistic merits but also the legitimacy of its sales. What Mott considered to be the "Myth of Thirty Millions,"

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<sup>79</sup> Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1897). [original] For this paper, however, another edition was used: Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1984).

<sup>80</sup> My understanding of social Christian novels is informed by Robert Glenn Wright's definitive work on the subject, *The Social Christian Novel*. According to Wright, social Christian novels shared a common purpose in attempting to resolve unfair political, economic, and religious practices. All shared the presumption that American democracy and Protestant Christianity mistreated or even denied the working class; however, all did not agree on the solution to social problems. Wright, R. Glenn, *The Social Christian Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989): 27, 36-37.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Luther Mott, "In His Steps: The Myth of Thirty Millions," *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947) 195.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

however, distracts scholars from the nature of their debate. As a result, much of the literature about Sheldon concentrates on the story behind *In His Steps* rather than the role Sheldon and *In His Steps* played within the social gospel movement.<sup>83</sup>

Literary critics and historians alike fail to give *In His Steps* proper consideration as an instrument for the social gospel because of its “popularity.” For example, in the most comprehensive study of social Christian novels, historian Robert Glenn Wright dismissed the importance of “popularity” in determining the worth of social Christian novels in the nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup> Since Sheldon was the most popular social Christian writer of his time, there is no doubt that Wright directly excludes Sheldon with this statement. In essence, Wright undermined Sheldon’s significance to the social gospel movement in order to maintain the cogency of the social gospel genre. This treatment of “popularity” not only provides reason to overlook Sheldon as a novelist but also insinuates his inferiority as a social gospel leader. Since Sheldon used novels as his primary method to explain the social gospel, historians often separate Sheldon from conventional social gospel theologians and activists, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and George Herron. This exclusion of Sheldon based on his career as a

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<sup>83</sup> “*In His Steps*: The Story of a Best Seller.” *Publisher's Weekly* 149, no. 10 (1946): 1383-84; John P. Ferré, *A Social Gospel for Millions: The Religious Bestsellers of Charles Sheldon, Charles Gordon, and Harold Bell Wright*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988); William C. Graham, *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995); Paul C. Gutjahr, *Popular American Literature of the 19th Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945*, (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1945); Roger Bourne Linscott, “On the Books.” *New York Herald Tribune Weekly*, July 13, 1947; Gerald D. McDonald, “*In His Steps*--All-Time Best Seller On Nobody's Best Seller List,” in *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, 70<sup>th</sup> ed. (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967), 1-5; Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947); Janet C. Olsen, “*In His Steps*: A Social Gospel Novel,” in *Religions of the United States in Practice* 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001): 253-266; David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); John W. Ripley, “*In His Steps*: All-Time Best Seller On Nobody's List,” *Kanhistique*, 5, no. 11 (March 1980): 12-13; John W. Ripley, “Last Rites for a Few Myths,” in *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, 70<sup>th</sup> ed., (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967): 14-26.; Gary Scott Smith, “Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* in the Context of Religion and Culture in Late Nineteenth Century America,” *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880-1925* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000); R. Glenn Wright, *The Social Christian Novel*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

<sup>84</sup> Wright, xviii.

novelist makes little sense considering Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden tried their hands at writing fiction and popular novels respectively.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, historians hail other social gospel novels, like Winston Churchill's *Inside the Cup*, for their style, message, and value in the social gospel. It is Sheldon's "popularity" that uniquely excludes him and his novel. Historian William Graham even insisted that Sheldon was not a "true prophet of the Social Gospel movement" because his message only influenced "simple people and those who elected a simple approach to complex problems."<sup>86</sup> To other scholars, Sheldon's use of sentimentality compromises his historical usefulness because fiction challenges, perhaps, the intellectual credibility of the social gospel; yet, sentimentality is critical to understanding social Christianity in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, categorizing Sheldon as anti-intellectual ignores his insistence that the world needed intellectual Christians.<sup>87</sup>

While scholars like Wright and Mott may commend Sheldon for using fiction as a means of expression and for reaching such popular heights, few address his fiction as a legitimate source of social gospel thought.<sup>88</sup> In fact most use Sheldon's popularity as evidence against his prestige within the social gospel. This interpretation of Sheldon, however, ignores his commitment to social Christian theology, investment in social reform, and conception of "*What would Jesus do?*" as a tool for social action. To repudiate Sheldon from the historical record is to exclude the most common expression the social gospel movement. Historians' exclusion of Sheldon misrepresents social gospel thought, skewing it toward high-brow, urban, liberal Protestants only. The social gospel, however, was distinctly middle-class, "colloquial," and

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<sup>85</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch's first published work, according to historian Christopher H. Evans was an unsigned essay in the *Christian Inquirer* in 1888. See Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 70; Washington Gladden, *The Christian League of Connecticut* (New York: The Century Company, 1883).

<sup>86</sup> William C. Graham, *Half Finished Heaven: The Social Gospel in American Literature*. (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 1995.) 73, 72.

<sup>87</sup> See Charles M. Sheldon, "Intellectual Christianity" (no date) *Writings- Sermons* compiled by Kansas State Historical Society, Charles M. Sheldon Collection 222 Box 1.

<sup>88</sup> Wright, 10-11; Mott, 197; The most notable exceptions are Paul Boyer, "In His Steps: A Reappraisal," *American Quarterly* 23 (1971): 60-78; Wayne Elzey, "What Would Jesus Do: In His Steps and the Moral Codes of the Middle Class," *Soundings* 58 (1975): 463-489.

evangelical.<sup>89</sup> In order to have a more comprehensive view of the social gospel Sheldon and *In His Steps* must be included in the conversation. When *In His Steps* is included in the canon of social gospel thought, a new history of the movement takes shape. Rather than dismiss the novel as a historical fluke or exercise in sentimentality, I will argue that *In His Steps* best reflects the historical intent and reality of the social gospel movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Above all else, Sheldon's most famous social gospel novel expressed the central tenets of the social gospel, represented its variety of thought, and outlined the social gospel movement's boundaries.

Like the social gospel itself, *In His Steps* is the story of middle-class Christians confronting their complacency toward rampant social problems. Set in the fictional town of Raymond, the novel begins with Reverend Henry Maxwell writing his weekly sermon. Interrupted by a vagrant looking for work, Maxwell turns the man away, indifferent to his plight. The following Sunday as Maxwell exhorts his congregation about Atonement, the vagrant interrupts the service to admonish the congregation's complacency and inability to truly follow in Jesus' steps. Before the unnamed<sup>90</sup> man can finish he collapses and later dies. Deeply moved, Maxwell encourages his congregants to ask themselves "what would Jesus do" for one year. The novel then follows several characters in their pledge to do so. Along the way twelve main characters recognize their selfishness and willful disregard for those less fortunate.<sup>91</sup> For

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<sup>89</sup> By "evangelical" I mean interested in spreading the gospel or "good news." In this case a gospel related to social engagement and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. By "evangelical," I do not intend to imply a revivalist and individualistic impulse only. For an assessment of evangelicalism in the social gospel, see Matthew Bowman, "Sin, Spirituality, and Primitivism: The Theologies of the American Social Gospel, 1885-1917," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 17 (2007): 95-126. The use of "colloquial" to describe the social gospel comes from William McGuire King's article "'History As Revelation' in the Theology of the Social Gospel," *The Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 109-129.

<sup>90</sup> Near the end of the book, we finally learn the name of this Jesus-like character: John Manning. This thirty-year old man had lost his job as a printer because his employer purchased linotype machines. He had been traveling and looking for work ever since.

<sup>91</sup> The main characters include: Henry Maxwell, pastor of Raymond's First Church; Edward Norman, editor of Raymond's daily newspaper; Alexander Powers, local railroad manager; Milton Wright, local businessman; Rachel Winslow, young opera singer; Virginia Page, young heiress; Rollin Page, young socialite; Jasper Chase, young novelist; President Marsh, Lincoln College President; Dr. Bruce, theologian in Chicago; Bishop, Chicago bishop; Felicia, Chicago debutante.

example, Virginia Page, a young heiress, reconsiders how she should spend her inheritance. No longer satisfied spending her money for herself, Virginia gives a million dollars to the Christian editor of the local paper and makes plans to establish a settlement in house in the local slum.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Felicia, a debutant in Chicago, gives up her wealth in order to start a housekeeping school for young women at Raymond's new settlement house (also funded by Virginia Page). Even Maxwell reexamined his role as a minister of the gospel. In the process, Maxwell made a list of "A Number of Things That Jesus Would Probably Do In This Parish," including "identify[ing] Himself with the great causes of humanity in some personal way that would call for self-denial and suffering."<sup>93</sup> Surprised by his own list, Maxwell noted that "nearly every point he had put down meant...a complete overturning of the custom and habit of years in the ministry."<sup>94</sup> Since taking the pledge Maxwell ventured beyond the comfort of his middle-class pulpit to speak directly to the working class at revival meetings and in factories. For Maxwell and other social gospellers, "What would Jesus do" required its pledgers to leave their comfortable middle class neighborhoods and explore the exotic world that contained the less fortunate.

Just as the social gospel required both feeling and action, so too did *In His Steps* inspire a change of heart and mind for local businessmen.<sup>95</sup> For instance, after taking the pledge, newspaper editor Edward Norman printed only what Jesus would, excluding summaries of sporting events as well as tobacco and alcohol advertisements.<sup>96</sup> Much to the town's surprise, Norman even stopped production of a Sunday newspaper. In spite of falling profits, Norman

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<sup>92</sup> Sheldon, *In His Steps*, Chapter 13, 104-110.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> I recognize that I say only "businessmen." Though women are central to social changes in *In His Steps*, historian Susan Lindley's article about women in social gospel novels accurately describes Sheldon's incorporation of women in this novel. Women, however, play a more active role in Sheldon's actual church, Central Congregational in Topeka, KS. See Susan Hill Lindley, "Women and the Social Gospel Novel," *Church History* 54 (1985): 56-73.

<sup>96</sup> Sheldon put this model of Christian editing into practice in 1901 when the editor of the *Topeka Daily Capital* challenged him to do so. See Billie Barnes Jensen, "A Social Gospel Experiment in Newspaper Reform: Charles M. Sheldon and the *Topeka Daily Capital*." *Church History* 33 (March 1964.): 74-83; John W. Ripley, "Another look at the Rev. Mr. Charles M. Sheldon's Christian daily newspaper," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 31 (1965): 1-40.

continued his reformed business practices by paying for the paper himself. His financial prayers were answered, however, when fellow First Church member Virginia Page donated money to his cause. In addition to Norman, local railroad manager Alexander Powers reconsidered his role as a manager for a prominent railroad company. After condoning unethical business practices for years, Powers' pledge inspired him to resign and speak out against his former company. To act as Jesus would, for Powers, meant meeting an ethical standard regardless of the financial and social consequences. Similarly, businessman Milton Wright re-conceptualized his company according to the principles of stewardship. As a result, Wright incorporated profit-sharing into his business plan. In sum, "What would Jesus do" caused these complacent Christians to recognize the social crisis so apparent to Josiah Strong and other social gospel figures. More importantly, "What would Jesus do" caused Wright, Powers, and Norman to re-evaluate their role in society, take a stand based on principle, and bring their community one step closer to an ideal state.

In addition to modeling the messages of the social gospel, *In His Steps* condenses the basis of social gospel theology into one phrase that epitomizes the ethos of the entire movement. In fact, the history of liberal Protestant thought in general and social gospel concerns in particular can be summed up with "What would Jesus do?"<sup>97</sup> In four words Sheldon summarized, for example, Francis Peabody's insistence on Jesus as the ideal moral figure. Sheldon, like Peabody, placed ethical behavior at the forefront of the social gospel. Both Peabody's social ethics and Sheldon's novel exhorted Christians to understand the "spirit of the law" rather than the "letter of the law." Peabody resisted the notion that Jesus offered systematic ethics; instead, he interpreted Jesus' ethical principles as "occasional."<sup>98</sup> According to Peabody, Jesus individualized ethical responses based on each situation rather than offering routinized answers.<sup>99</sup> Jesus' response, then, depended on the occasion. Similarly, Sheldon refused to answer

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<sup>97</sup> By liberal Protestant thought I am referring to Protestants who by mid-nineteenth century are influenced by, among other things, higher criticism, Christian ethics, and the historical Jesus.

<sup>98</sup> Jacob Henry Dorn *Washington Gladden; Prophet of the Social Gospel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 86.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

"What would Jesus do" for anyone other than himself.<sup>100</sup> Knowing and doing what Jesus would do in one's particular situation, to Sheldon, depended on the individual understanding Jesus' life.<sup>101</sup> Central to one's actions, for both Sheldon and Peabody, was an understanding of Jesus' life and moral principles. This focus on Jesus as central to one's life was essential to the social gospel. As Walter Rauschenbusch explained, "whatever we may think of single points, let us stick to the leading thought of Jesus, that every advance toward the Kingdom of God, that is, toward the true social order, involves a raising of the ethical standards accepted by society. This is a principle of social progress which every leading intellect ought to know by heart."<sup>102</sup> Not only did Sheldon raise ethical standards, he made that standard understandable and accessible to the masses. Sheldon provided the voice that repeatedly exhorted white middle-class Christians to maintain proper conduct. As historian Paul Phillips explained, Sheldon "touched the soul of the Anglo-American readership" by accentuating "the personal element in Christian discipleship, in which each believer must individually follow in Christ's steps to achieve overall social justice."<sup>103</sup> Consequently, *In His Steps* provides the simplest and most mainstream explanation of how the person of Jesus was used by social gospellers to encourage a new ethical standard.

Improving ethical behavior was one part in the great effort to transform individuals and American society. Although each individual asked themselves "What would Jesus do" in order to transform their own lives, each character did so as a part of the larger movement in the fictional First Church. The full effect of a person's pledge was not felt unless placed in the context of a community of believers. Virginia and Rachel, for example, established Raymond's first settlement house by combining their talents, resources, and visions. Similarly, Bishop and Dr. Bruce established their own settlement house in Chicago through ecumenism. Even the figures who acted alone did so for the community. President Marsh, for instance, ran for political office to represent other Christians who saw alcohol as impeding social progress. Additionally, Powers,

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<sup>100</sup> Sheldon, *In His Steps*, 18. Critics use this passage to argue that Sheldon's conception of the social gospel was more conservative evangelical or lacking a full theological exposition. It is, however, similar to Peabody's understanding of Christian ethics.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus*, College Voluntary Study Courses 7 (New York: Association Press, 1925), 90.

<sup>103</sup> Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 30.

the whistleblower for a fictional railroad company, lost his fortune and his social status in order to demonstrate Mammon's lack of power in a Christian city. *In His Steps* demonstrates that whenever the individual suffers, society wins. The prevalence of individualism in *In His Steps*, then, is not in contrast with social reform methods but necessary for social gospel ends. For Sheldon, "What would Jesus do" was the mechanism through which individuals could undergo the spiritual conversion necessary to apply the social gospel. Consequently, Sheldon's use of the phrase "What would Jesus do" was not preferencing individual change over corporate change, but rather facilitating corporate change through the individual.

This transformational order—individual then corporate—was not particular to Sheldon. Individual transformation, for social gospelers, was a prerequisite for social transformation. For example, Francis Peabody insisted that society would change only if individuals changed first. In fact, this was one of his primary arguments against socialism. Peabody believed socialism was not a proper means of fixing social problems because society could not transform the individual; instead, Peabody believed, only individuals could transform society.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Washington Gladden believed individual and social change must occur in concert. In order for society to be improved, individuals must possess virtuous character. In this way, communities filled with virtuous persons alleviated the existence of social injustice, or what Walter Rauschenbusch referred to as social sin. Although he is most known for emphasizing social sin, Rauschenbusch also never rejected individual responsibility. Presenting the individual and the collective as "mutually reinforcing," Rauschenbusch stated: "A collective moral ideal is a necessity for the individual and the race. Every man must have a conscious determination to help in his own place to work out a righteous social order for and with God."<sup>105</sup> Sheldon's emphasis on individual responsibility, then, is not evidence of a conservative-evangelical understanding of Christianity but a widely held understanding of the role of the individual within the social gospel. Furthermore, Sheldon supplied the collective moral ideal that social gospelers demanded. By bringing Sheldon and *In His Steps* to the center of the movement, the dual emphases of individual and social transformation are more balanced than with any other figure or any other piece of literature.

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<sup>104</sup> Dorn, 86.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875-1925. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993) 253; Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus*, 76.

Unlike other social gospel leaders, Sheldon's message coincided with its practice. The communal nature in which the story was first experienced underscores the social message of *In His Steps*. Before the "Myth of Thirty Millions" and even before publication, Sheldon read *In His Steps* as a sermon-story to his congregation at Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas. In much the same way that *In His Steps* is the story of individuals undergoing a transformation together, Sheldon's first audience listened to the story together in order to be transformed together. Just as the fictional disciples of *In His Steps* pledged to do what Jesus would do together, members of Sheldon's congregation took the pledge communally. Before Sheldon finished reading *In His Steps* out loud to his congregation, his congregants had pledged to do what Jesus would do in Topeka. According to Sheldon, the most active congregants were those for whom the story was written—Washburn College students.<sup>106</sup> These students active in the local Christian Endeavor Society chapter created their own "What would Jesus do" group. Young people banding together in the name of what Jesus would do became a fad for the nationwide Christian Endeavor Society. Christian Endeavor Society chapters, with allegedly four million members at the end of the nineteenth-century, responded to *In His Steps* so well that publishers printed special Endeavor editions of Sheldon's novel.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, while the practice of the "What would Jesus do" pledge occurred with an individual, the process and products were social.

The social nature of reading *In His Steps*, in fact, is one argument for why it sold so many copies. In the seventieth anniversary edition of *In His Steps*, Gerald McDonald explained that Sheldon's novel was the perfect book for "non-readers [who] cannot easily endure the solitude and withdrawal which is essential to reading."<sup>108</sup> Since *In His Steps* pervaded American popular culture in the nineteenth century, reading it connected individuals to communities.<sup>109</sup> Not only could individuals discuss the details of the novel, but also they could discuss how Jesus would act in their communities. Historian Gregory Jackson explained that Sheldon "denied readers a

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<sup>106</sup> Sheldon, *The History of "In His Steps,"* (Privately Printed, 1938) 6.

<sup>107</sup> Gerald D. McDonald, "In His Steps'--All-Time Best Seller On Nobody's Best Seller List," in *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, 70<sup>th</sup> ed. (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967) 5-6; J.W. Ripley, "In His Steps: All-Time Best Seller On Nobody's List," *Kanhistique*, 5.11 (1980), 12.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

passive role, presenting instead real-life scenarios that demanded narrative participation, insisted on moral volition, and asked readers to apply discursive enactments to their own lives through imaginative exercises for structuring everyday reality.”<sup>110</sup> In this way, Sheldon’s congregants and readers were not interested in being entertained but in receiving a message to apply to their own lives.<sup>111</sup> This method of reading engaged readers so that they searched for religious meaning in fiction as if it were scripture.<sup>112</sup> In practice, then, reading *In His Steps* demonstrates what Jackson considered “the heart of the Social Gospel pragmatism,” the question of “how to live an engaged life of faith in a modern age.”<sup>113</sup> In Topeka and around the nation, the pietistic message of “What would Jesus do” was the epitome of social gospel practice because it inspired social action.

For social gospelers, social engagement was the means to a larger end. Above all else, the social gospel movement struggled to actualize the Kingdom of God on earth. In addition to providing a new moral standard and method for social change, “What would Jesus do?” demonstrated the hope that Sheldon and other social gospelers had toward creating a more perfect society. Washington Gladden, for example, explained his conception of the ideal society in his work *Applied Christianity*: “The two coordinate forces of the ideal society are self-interest and benevolence. In the perfect society they will exactly balance each other.”<sup>114</sup> As a fellow Congregationalist interested in perfecting society, Sheldon created a balance of self-interest and benevolence through *In His Steps*. What balances the individual and social responsibilities, not least of all, is the reader’s liberty to interpret the message “What would Jesus do?” By tailoring the message to their lives, characters like Rachel Winslow could cultivate their interests, like signing, while also helping others. Moreover, Sheldon supplied a practical and popular method of perfecting society through individuals changing their own behavior. While other leaders wrote

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<sup>110</sup> Gregory S. Jackson, “What Would Jesus Do?": Practical Christianity, Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel,” *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 121 (2006): 643.

<sup>111</sup> American Studies scholar Erin Smith refers to this as the “take-home” message or life application method of reading. See Erin Smith, “What Would Jesus Do?: The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace,” *Book History* 10: 193-221.

<sup>112</sup> Jackson, 654.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 647.

<sup>114</sup> Washington Gladden, *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions* (New York: Arno Press, 1976) 96.

esoteric theologies, Sheldon provided lay Christians with a practical method for establishing the Kingdom of God. At once, "What would Jesus do" served as a personal ethical standard, a corporate vision, and a cosmic hope. Maxwell expresses his optimism at the end of the novel:

The church of Jesus in the city and throughout the country! ... Was the movement begun in Raymond to spend itself in a few churches... then die away as a local movement, a stirring on the surface but not to extend deep and far? ... He thought he saw the church of Jesus in America open its heart to the moving of the Spirit and rise to the sacrifice of its ease and self-satisfaction in the name of Jesus. He thought he saw the motto, 'What would Jesus do?' inscribed on every church door, and written on every church member's heart. ... He rose at last with the awe of one who looked at heavenly things. He felt the human forces and the human sins of the world as never before. And with a hope that walks hand in hand with faith and love Henry Maxwell, disciple of Jesus, laid him down to sleep and dreamed of the regeneration of Christendom, and saw in his dream a church of Jesus without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, following him all the way, walking obediently in His steps. (Sheldon, *In His Steps*, 241-242)

Sheldon's novel and his general outlook about the future of Protestant Christianity demonstrated a distinctive utopian character. Although Sheldon received criticism for it, this hope for an ideal social order on earth epitomized the social gospel.

Like Maxwell, Sheldon dreamed of how "What would Jesus do" could transform his congregation, his city, and the world. Sheldon believed the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth. In fact, he considered the Middle West, and even Kansas, the most likely place for its actualization: "I prefer to live in Kansas on account of the future that is in the Middle West. ... I have almost come to conclusion that in the Middle West the future empire of ideas and of human satisfaction will be built. I don't like that word 'empire.' Let me say 'republic,' or even at the risk of being misunderstood 'Kingdom of God.'"<sup>115</sup> Sheldon's congregants, Mid-Western social gospelers and his readers would not have misunderstood Sheldon. Sheldon, like others, sought nothing less than the Kingdom of God. In light of the excessively urban historiography of the social gospel, Sheldon provides an avenue into exploring underrepresented figures and locations. Though Topeka was not as urbanized as New York or Columbus, the Golden City attempted to

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<sup>115</sup> Charles M. Sheldon, "Why I prefer to live in Kansas," (1931) in *Kansas Clippings* 2, [Topeka, KS Kansas State Historical Society, no date], 6-8.

assert its identity as an industrial town amid urbanization and immigration on a smaller scale.<sup>116</sup> In addition to these changes Topeka also coped with losing its identity as a cosmopolitan frontier city near the center of the Santa Fe Railroad. As a result, Sheldon's regional identity should not be overlooked as an influential part to his conception of the social gospel.

Not only does Sheldon's popularity challenge the notion that the social gospel occurred in Northeastern cities only, but Sheldon's regional identity also provided a source of pride for some of his readers.<sup>117</sup> As historian Susan Curtis affirmed in *Consuming Faith*: "[The social gospel] affected Protestantism in small cities and burghs in the Midwest and the South as well as in the sprawling metropolises of the North and the Northeast. . . . Furthermore people from small towns and farms first gave it expression."<sup>118</sup> As a mid-sized city caught between frontier life and urbanization, Topeka was primed to be a capital in the Kingdom of God because the general mood in Kansas at the end of the nineteenth century was one of political, social, and religious change.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Kansas' identity entering the twentieth century was based on their reputation as a moral force in the mid-nineteenth century. The legacy of the state's territorial identity, "Bleeding Kansas," endured as newspapers across the nation observed the state's moral

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<sup>116</sup> The reference to the Golden City is due to the work of Alan Bearman and Jennifer Mills who reminded me of the city's crest.

<sup>117</sup> In an 1899 edition of the *Nickel Magazine*, Philip Eastman affirmed: 'It has been left for a western author . . . to write the story of the century' See McDonald, 6.

<sup>118</sup> Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 3.

<sup>119</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as the social gospel gained momentum with the rising middle class in Kansas' urban areas, Populism reached an evangelical fervor among the working class in rural areas. Both gained momentum, in part, because Kansas Protestants realized that the Church no longer related to the working class properly. This feeling continued into the twentieth century. Just five years after Sheldon read *In His Steps* to his congregation, Charles Parham facilitated Pentecostal revivals in Topeka. Five years later, Parham's student, William Seymour, moved to Los Angeles and led the Azusa Street revivals. I would like to thank Jennifer Mills and Alan Bearman for reminding me of the volatility of religious feeling in Kansas during Sheldon's lifetime. See Alan F. Bearman and Jennifer L. Mills, "Charles Sheldon and Charles F. Parham—Adapting Christianity to the Challenges of the West: Topeka, Kansas as the Birthplace of Modern American Religion," *Kansas History: A Journal for the Central Plains* (Spring 2009): forthcoming.

reform. Kansans' part Puritan, part "transplanted Yankee," and part rural identity fascinated reporters like Ernest Hamlin Abbott:

"There is nothing abstract about Kansas. Even ideality there becomes concrete. There are signs of an approaching time when Christianity there will be identified with motive and spirit rather than with precept. In the meantime those ministers and laymen who are magnifying specific reforms as the substance of Christianity are serving a highly useful purpose, for they are using concrete terms, which everybody who hears them understands, making them religious."<sup>120</sup>

In other words, there was a peculiar religious climate in Kansas that allowed religion to permeate the public sphere in ways not allowed in other places. This, in fact, was the result of the development of the social gospel in Kansas that could not be fully explained as Northern, Southern, or Western.

Just as Sheldon's work occurred in between the city and the frontier, *In His Steps* occupies middle ground between liberal and conservative Protestant evangelicalism. *In His Steps* sits at a crossroads in American Protestant Christianity not least of all because it was written ten years after *Applied Christianity* and ten years before *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Although *In His Steps* occupies this transitional space, many historians anachronistically compare it to the theological (intellectual) standard of *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), the conservative worldview of *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915), and the neo-orthodox critique of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). While Sheldon, speaking through Maxwell, did not provide a concrete direction for the social gospel, he created theological boundaries—neither too far left nor too far right. Sheldon opened up the conversation to his audience, but also encouraged a balanced approach. Sheldon's strategy was not unlike other social gospel leaders. According to Rauschenbusch, Jesus did not ask or demand people to break with the old law, but expand it: "...more respect for personality, more truthfulness, more peacefulness, more love. Thus [Jesus] combined continuity with progress, conservatism with radicalism."<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Washington Gladden meticulously considered the advantages and disadvantages of radical and conservative approaches to social questions. Gladden, more than any other figure, exhorted Christians to balance their responses to social problems. Even Sheldon's medium, the social gospel novel,

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<sup>120</sup> Ernest Hamlin Abbott, "Religious Life in America VIII: Kansas," *Outlook* 19 April 1902 (New York): 968.

<sup>121</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus*, 87-89, 89.

demonstrated an ambivalence between radical and conservative Christian responses.<sup>122</sup> To exclude Sheldon from the social gospel movement for not overturning the social order, then, is to misunderstand the history of the social gospel. These notions of social justice do not become popular until after the turn of the century, particularly after Rauschenbusch condemned Sheldon for not being radical enough.<sup>123</sup> Sheldon, however, anticipated this turn, not to mention later joined it, by including a socialist voice at the end of the novel. Nevertheless, Sheldon's inclusion of conservative and liberal Christian thought is not a contradiction to the social gospel, but rather a commitment to uniting Christendom for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

When the social gospel is understood as mixture of evangelical and liberal Christian elements, the presence of evangelical and revivalist themes in *In His Steps* can be seen as an expression, rather than contradiction, of the social gospel. There is no denying that major events in the novel take place around a revival occurring in the Rectangle. Notably, the minister preaching at the revival is not Maxwell, but another character entirely, Dr. Gray. Gray is clearly depicted and described as the revivalist preacher with "big tent" revival experience. Gray invites Maxwell to preach at the tent in the Rectangle, but the two have distinct roles. Maxwell's primary audience is his middle-class congregation. His primary message—"What would Jesus do"—is intended for his audience, not the working-class participants of the revival. Maxwell's lesson to learn through his pledge is how to preach to and relate to this new, working class audience he has previously ignored. Although Maxwell works with Gray and attends some revival meetings, he is not a revivalist. His purpose is to demonstrate to his congregation the opportunities for them to lift up the working class. Moreover, the middle-class character that is

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<sup>122</sup> According to Wright, "in the novels studied in this monograph, those that are openly sectarian and seek converts through fictional devices are indeed, with very few exceptions, politically, socially, and theologically conservative. However, novels that are evangelical in the cause of the social gospel, that are nondenominational but often published by denominational presses, are almost unanimously liberal in relation to politics, social dislocation, and issues of sectarian dogma. Moreover... to be conservative on Protestant-led reform did not necessarily mean that an author was a strong partisan of a dogmatic purity of his or her own brand of Protestantism. Quite often neither of these issues was mentioned in the works read." Wright, 106.

<sup>123</sup> In addressing Sheldon's famous phrase, Rauschenbusch stated "To most men the demand to live as Jesus would, is mainly useful to bring home the fact that it is hard to live a Christlike [*sic*] life in a mammonistic [*sic*] society. It convicts our social order of sin, but does not reconstruct it." Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914), 46.

converted at the revival, Rolin Page, does so by the work of Gray, not Maxwell. In this way, Maxwell—like Sheldon—is not converting souls to Christ like revivalist preachers who convince sinners of their personal sins. Maxwell convicts middle-class Christians of their social responsibility, converting them to the social gospel. The ultimate reward was not the individual's regeneration, but the transformation of the degenerate world into the Kingdom of God: "If men followed Him regardless of results the world would at one begin to enjoy a new life."<sup>124</sup> The presence of both of these influences should not be mistaken for duality; instead, these two methods, side-by-side, represent equilibrium. In Sheldon's mind—and evidenced in his career—these two elements, traditional revivalism and the social gospel, were not contradictory, but complimentary and even necessary in order for the Kingdom to be achieved. In fact, much of Sheldon's success as a storyteller rests in his balance of these two major influences: revivalism and liberalism.<sup>125</sup>

The existence of revivalist figures, however, does not indicate that Sheldon was conservative. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *In His Steps* did not represent the ubiquitous Christian message historians and literary critics consider it to illustrate in the twenty-first century. Its acceptance as a form of mainstream, if not clichéd, Protestant Christianity has much to do with the assimilation of liberal social gospel ideas into moderate and conservative Christianity. At the time Sheldon *In His Steps*, his ideas were far from mainstream. In fact, many theologians bitterly opposed Sheldon's conception of "What would Jesus do" because it was radical. For instance, at the Modern Imitation of Christ: A Symposium (1904) various

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<sup>124</sup> Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps*, 224.

<sup>125</sup> These two influences reflect the history of pulpit storytelling more generally. In his article, "The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling," historian David Reynolds explained that it was not until the nineteenth-century that narrative storytelling became a common practice among preachers. Reynolds recognized that this trend in sermons had a variety of influences including: "by religious liberalization and a widespread application of faith to social issues, by the preaching of blacks and frontier revivalists in the South, by evangelical sermonizing in the North, by literary Unitarianism, and later by the arguments of Horace Bushnell." Of these influences, Reynolds asserted that the emerging tradition comprised of two equal yet contrasting styles: evangelical-revivalist sentimentality and liberal-Unitarian "rhetorical beauty." Although these styles different, they shared a common purpose in capturing the attention of the masses. The rise of pulpit storytelling, Reynolds explained, culminated with Sheldon's *In His Steps*. Reynolds does not examine why *In His Steps*, as opposed to any other story, reached such popular heights. Presumably, Sheldon's balance of these two themes is the primary reason. Reynolds, 480.

theologians responded to the idea of “What Would Jesus Do” or the imitation of Jesus.<sup>126</sup> Each author agreed that it was unnecessary and impractical to imitate Jesus because one can never do what Jesus did. Alternatively, they suggested that one can be Christ-like. By interpreting Sheldon’s message literally, these theologians overlooked the fact that Sheldon probably would have agreed. Ironically, understanding the “spirit” of Jesus’ intent was what these theologians said one should do.

One of the most acerbic criticisms of *In His steps* came from Reverend William Robertson Nicoll who not only denounced Sheldon’s prose,<sup>127</sup> but also denigrated his understanding of Christianity. As for Sheldon’s proposed solution, the “What would Jesus do” pledge, Nicoll wrote: “There is not a sign that he has ever pondered deeply the great problems of the social order, or that he has even grasped the essentials of the Christian creed. But as a child can raise questions that puzzle the wisest, so Mr. Sheldon has raised them.”<sup>128</sup> Nicoll critiqued Sheldon on four main issues: Sheldon’s misunderstanding of the role of Jesus, the differing relationships one has to Jesus and God, the inadequacies of “what would Jesus do” as a moral principle, and the implications such a pledge has on the Church.<sup>129</sup> First, Nicoll disagreed with Sheldon’s interpretation of Jesus as a “friend” rather than a “saviour.” Nicoll explained: “To [Sheldon] our lord is practically a good man who was the example for others, who lived and died as their example. ...All that is needed in order to be a Christian is simply to follow Christ, and to follow Christ is one part of His work, that part being the uplifting of social conditions.”<sup>130</sup> For Nicoll, this understanding of Jesus, and thus Christianity, was the “poorest and shallowest kind.”<sup>131</sup> Second, Nicoll asserted the differences between serving God versus serving Christ. To

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<sup>126</sup> Walter L. Hervey, Charles R. Henderson, Thomas C. Hall, Henry S. Nash, George E. Dawson, Fraser McDowell, and William Newton Clarke. Walter L., Hervey, Charles R. Henderson, Thomas C. Hall, et al. “The Modern Imitation of Christ: A Symposium,” *The Biblical World* 24, no. 4 (October 1904): 248-260.

<sup>127</sup> Reverend Arthur H. Kolsti quoted Nicoll as stating there is not “a single striking sentence in any of his writings, or any sign of culture beyond that of the common school.” Arthur H. Kolsti, “The Rev. Mr. Nicoll's British Weekly Takes a Long Look at The Reverend Mr. Sheldon's *In His Steps*,” in *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, 70<sup>th</sup> ed. (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967), 11.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Nicoll, Sheldon emphasized the latter to the detriment of the former. Third, Nicoll disapproved of the “what would Jesus do” ethic because it “ignore[d] the whole New Testament theme of the unique vocation of Jesus among men.”<sup>132</sup> Imitating Jesus, for Nicoll, diluted his exceptional nature. Finally, Nicoll thought Sheldon was dangerously close to encouraging an overly individualistic Christianity. Summarizing Nicoll’s criticisms, Reverend Arthur H. Kolsti explained “[Nicoll] feared *In His Steps* implanted the suggestion that the church was a group of good people who served unfortunate people. This he felt to be a spurious understanding of the church.”<sup>133</sup> In spite of these criticisms, Kolsti insisted “Nicoll understood, was sympathetic, and profoundly admired the motive of Dr. Sheldon. His critique represented not a rejection but the reflection of a theologically sensitive mind desirous of defending the Gospel from distortion and caricature.”<sup>134</sup> What Nicoll considered a caricature of the gospel represented a simplistic route to the Kingdom of God for social gospellers. Nevertheless, the radical nature of Sheldon’s conception of Jesus and his suggestion for social reform must not be eclipsed by its popularity or modern acceptance.

Sheldon’s radical use of Jesus, however, must not be confused with radical means of achieving social change. *In His Steps* falls short of radical change in much the same way the social gospel did. While Sheldon’s understanding of the social gospel remained more conservative than Walter Rauschenbusch’s, Sheldon was not conservative. Although Sheldon and *In His Steps* are criticized for not being radical enough, it is precisely because *In His Steps* is not a radical work of fiction that it is useful for understanding the social gospel. *In His Steps* failed to embrace radical systematic change in much the same way the social gospel failed to achieve it.<sup>135</sup> The tensions in the novel mirror the tensions within the movement. Prior to the twentieth-century and more specifically prior to Rauschenbusch’s *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), the social gospel did not have a clear theological position around which historians could define the movement. Consequently, the social gospel movement was a portion

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>135</sup> Janet Olsen explained that the social gospel was “one form of social Christianity” that “called for sacrifice and service but stopped short of the redistribution of wealth” See Janet C. Olsen, “In His Steps: A Social Gospel Novel,” in *Religions of the United States in Practice*, Princeton Readings in Religions 10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) 253.

of social Christianity that aimed to solve social problems through Christian principles in a variety of liberal and conservative ways.

Rather than advocate one method of change—let alone a radical one—through *In His Steps* Sheldon included several areas in need of reform and a variety of avenues for it.<sup>136</sup> Characters within *In His Steps* privately funded settlement houses, implemented profit-sharing, legislated temperance reform, advocated a single-tax, championed unionism, and contemplated socialism.<sup>137</sup> It is because *In His Steps* allowed for such a variety that it best represents the development of social gospel thought. If nothing else, *In His Steps* demonstrates the twentieth-century shift of early social gospelers toward Christian socialism. Prior to the turn of the century, Gladden and Peabody, for example, agreed on the usefulness of socialism even though both ultimately expressed serious concerns about it. In the early twentieth century, Sheldon embraced socialism, although not to the extent that Walter Rauschenbusch or George Herron did. Furthermore, it is not until later in the movement, as Rauschenbusch reached for theological legitimacy, that secularized reform took precedence over messages like Sheldon's. In *Christianizing the Social Order*, Rauschenbusch criticized Sheldon's work because "it convicts our social order of sin but it does not reconstruct it."<sup>138</sup> Rauschenbusch's desire to overturn the social order in the early twentieth century should not ostracize Sheldon from the movement's late nineteenth-century sentimental form; even with Rauschenbusch's critique the social gospel was filled with aspirations of social perfection through a variety of forms. Efficacy and historical hindsight should not negate these themes, but rather enrich our understanding of the social

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<sup>136</sup> McDonald explains that "Without reading at all like a sociological treatise, the book managed to touch briefly upon such topics as technological unemployment, trade unionism, monopolies, 'the new woman,' the single tax, socialism, temperance, pure foods, settlement houses and city missions, the cooperative movement, and 'the mess in city hall,' It was timely, you see, and some of it was timeless." See Gerald D. McDonald, 5-6

<sup>137</sup> Paul S. Boyer, Maurice C. Latta, Gerald McDonald, and Leo F. O'Conner dispute the variety of social issues in *In His Steps*. See: Paul S. Boyer, "In His Steps: A Reappraisal," *American Quarterly* 23 (Spring 1971): 60-78; Maurice C. Latta, "The Background for the Social Gospel in American Protestantism," *Church History* 5, no. 3 (1936): 256-270; Gerald D. McDonald, "In His Steps--All-Time Best Seller On Nobody's Best Seller List," in *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, (Topeka, KS: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967), 1-5; Leo F. O'Connor, "Charles M. Sheldon: Reform in Orthodox Garb," in *Religion in the American Novel: The Search for Belief, 1860-1920*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984) 253-269.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1915), 46. Assessed online [July 26, 2008]

gospel. Sheldon complicates the notion that the social gospel was a “sub-movement within religious liberalism” because his novel and its proposals were so popular.<sup>139</sup> In addition, excluding him makes it easier to minimize the variety of thought within the social gospel. On the other hand, including him contradicts long-standing notions about the social gospel itself, particularly its urban character, its intellectualism, and its relationship to socialism. The absence of strong socialist or radical tendencies in *In His Steps* should not prevent it from being a significant piece of the historiographical puzzle because, as historian Paul Philips asserted, “Perhaps what is even more significant is that *In His Steps* reflects the essence of social Christianity itself, with its various nuances and, at times, seeming contradictions.”<sup>140</sup> Consequently, Sheldon is one voice that must not be silenced precisely because *In His Steps* challenges conventional boundaries for the social gospel movement by demonstrating its variety of thought.

In spite of its alleged inadequacy at artistic expression, *In His Steps* became the most popular social gospel novel, not to mention one of the best selling books of all time. According to historian Susan Curtis, “Rauschenbusch's optimism in 1912 stemmed from his belief that the social gospel was pervasive and popular.”<sup>141</sup> Rauschenbusch, however, could not have considered the social gospel to be popular had it not been for Sheldon and *In His Steps*. It is because Sheldon was popular that historians’ eschewal of his relevance and its significance in the social gospel movement is so surprising. Both “a product of its time and timeless,” *In His Steps* condenses a variety of social gospel thought into one phrase that captures the spirit of the entire movement.<sup>142</sup> Sheldon’s novel provides an ethical standard, a vision for Christianity, and a hope for the Kingdom of God. When Sheldon is left out of the history of the social gospel, the social gospel becomes an expression of high-brow, upper middle-class, urban Protestants only. Former frontier cities like Topeka, not fully urbanized yet no longer rural, are left to historical oblivion for the sake of maintaining theological cohesion. Furthermore, the inclusion of *In His Steps* as an expression of social gospel restrains historians’ use of Walter Rauschenbusch. The two are often

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<sup>139</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972): 786.

<sup>140</sup> Philips, 131.

<sup>141</sup> Curtis, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Quote from McDonald, 6.

considered to be opposites within the movement. Walter Rauschenbusch with his sophisticated treatise on social gospel theology and Sheldon with his middle-brow sentimentality. Both had the same aim and needed one another if the movement was to be successful. While Walter Rauschenbusch remains the most insightful explanation and thorough expression of social gospel theology, he is not the only expression, let alone the most widely-known. After all, popularizing the gospel, especially with regard to practical social application, was the hope of the entire movement. The fact that Sheldon reached the masses in unparalleled fashion should not exclude him, but make him a definitive leader within social gospel historiography. His exclusion, then, speaks more to what historians want the social gospel to be rather than to what it actually was.

## CHAPTER 3

### A GREAT NEGLECTED VOICE: LEGACIES OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT

When historians address the social gospel movement, they turn to definitive figures to represent the whole. Much of the historiography, in fact, describes the lives and virtues of great white men including Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Francis Peabody. Using *In His Steps: What would Jesus do* as their evidence, historians exclude Charles M. Sheldon from the “core” of the social gospel movement. Indeed, Sheldon appears atypical because he successfully used fiction to express his theology, because he was not located in the North nor a part of its urban elite, and because he offered no “detailed blueprint of a thoroughly reformed society.”<sup>143</sup> This spurious reasoning excludes Sheldon from the heart of the movement by ignoring, among other things, the similarities Sheldon shared with these revered social gospel leaders. Recent historians, however, have recovered “neglected voices” within the social gospel movement.<sup>144</sup> These studies focused on black and female narratives as well as gendered and regional perspectives in the story of the social gospel movement. These voices include, among others, Reverdy C. Ransom, Vida Scudder, and Nannie Helen Burroughs. Sheldon is further excluded from the social gospel movement in these instances because he was an educated white male, because he was not located in the South nor a part of its rural working class, and because his fiction was not radical enough. In each case, historians uniquely exclude Sheldon when in fact his career demonstrates common themes among social gospellers on each side of the historiography. By taking Sheldon more seriously historians can “re-open” and “re-evaluate” social gospel history, particularly the inclusivity or exclusivity of the movement.<sup>145</sup>

Despite new developments within social gospel historiography, historians continually place Sheldon on the periphery of the movement. Historians disregard Sheldon as both a “great man” and a “neglected voice” when they consider him to be a “popularizer” of the social gospel,

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<sup>143</sup> Timothy Miller, “In Sheldon's Steps: Charles M. Sheldon and the Social Gospel,” [Unpublished Manuscript, 1986] 299, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, KS.

<sup>144</sup> Susan Lindley provides commentary on these voices in “Neglected Voices and Praxis in the Social Gospel.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2001): 75-102.

<sup>145</sup> See Lindley, “Neglected Voices,” 76. She calls for the social gospel to be “re-opened and re-evaluated.”

social injustice, or Christian ethics.<sup>146</sup> For example, historian William McGuire King asserted that "many of the social gospel proponents were populizers and publicists, rather than profound religious thinkers."<sup>147</sup> Including Sheldon in his list of such figures, King drew sharp boundaries around "true" social gospel leaders. Even Sheldon's biographer, historian Timothy Miller, described Sheldon's role in the movement as "one of communication, in which he carried to his congregation and to large audiences the ideas of Lyman Abbott, Richard Ely, George Herron, [and] Walter Rauschenbusch."<sup>148</sup> According to Miller, Sheldon interacted with social gospel leaders, but never fully represented their ideas or matched their intellectual stature.<sup>149</sup> Sheldon, however, belongs within the list of the social gospel's key figures not because the movement was "anamorphous" as Miller suggested but because Sheldon's career was analogous to "standard" figures and "neglected" ones.<sup>150</sup> A common narrative exists among social gospellers that neither overstates Walter Rauschenbusch's role nor understates Sheldon's. Likewise, social gospellers shared experiences not limited to the North or South, to urban or rural environments, nor to white

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<sup>146</sup> For works that refer to Sheldon as a "popularizer" see: Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture*, (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), William McGuire King, "'History As Revelation' in the Theology of the Social Gospel," *The Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 109-129, David Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Timothy Miller, *Following in His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), Robert Glenn Wright, *The Social Christian Novel*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

<sup>147</sup> William McGuire King. 'History As Revelation' in the Theology of the Social Gospel. *The Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 110.

<sup>148</sup> Miller, "In Sheldon's Steps," 313.

<sup>149</sup> See Miller, 137. To be fair, Miller acknowledges that his purpose in the chapter "The Social Reformer," is not to compare Sheldon to other social gospellers. Instead, he left room for future scholars to address this issue. Nevertheless, Miller's biography remains the only definitive work on Sheldon's life. As a result, Miller's conception of Sheldon's role is an important piece in the historiography. Similarly, historian Christopher H. Evans supports this description of Sheldon by stating in his biography of Walter Rauschenbusch that no one "with the possible exception of the fiction of Charles Sheldon" better communicated social gospel than Rauschenbusch. Although Evans noted the significant role of Sheldon, he also implied that Sheldon was no match to Rauschenbusch; yet no figure equaled Sheldon's popularity. See Evans, xxv.

<sup>150</sup> Timothy Miller, "In Sheldon's Steps," 299.

or black figures. In other words, an examination of Sheldon's life and career affords him a legitimacy and the movement an inclusivity otherwise denied in the historiography.

Although many historians reduce Sheldon's career to what can be read in his novels, there is more to his story. Not least of all, Sheldon witnessed the historically underestimated ideological shift at Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts. Since its establishment as the first theological institution in New England, Andover held a reputation for its orthodox Calvinism and missionary emphasis.<sup>151</sup> Its commitment to orthodoxy, however, must not be confused for insularity. In fact, in his definitive history of Andover, historian Daniel Day Williams explained that the founders ensured a "revolt from orthodoxy" by hiring professors with a variety of opinions and by encouraging students to read diverse literature.<sup>152</sup> As early as the 1820s, biblical criticism and German rationalism entered Andover. Professors like Moses Stuart welcomed German influences yet asserted its flaws. As a result, disputes over the Andover Creed, higher criticism and science brewed silently since the Civil War. It was not until 1880, however, that the first faculty member, William J. Tucker, publicly disapproved of the Creed.<sup>153</sup> While his dissent intensified the controversy, conflicts hit their climax with the retirement of orthodox-Calvinist Professor Edward A. Park. In 1883, Andover graduate and "new school" theologian George Harris replaced Park, marking a new era that tipped the scales toward a more liberal theology at Andover.<sup>154</sup> The following year Tucker and his fellow "new school" faculty established their own journal, *The Andover Review*, to express their "new" theology.<sup>155</sup> Remarkably, Sheldon's entrance coincided with this momentous paradigm shift among the faculty.

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<sup>151</sup> Daniel Day Williams, *The Andover Liberals: A Study in American Theology*, (New York: Octagon, 1970), 1.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. As Williams noted "four of the five men who became editors of the liberal *Andover Review* in 1883 had graduated from Andover during the years when [Edward A.] Park was teaching, and when the creed was still, in the man, the doctrinal standard." Williams goes on to explain that by the time that these four became professors at Andover, part of the foundation for liberalism was fully formed—a new perspective on the life of Jesus, 22.

When Sheldon began classes in 1883 Harris gave his inaugural address, setting the tone for the new, liberal Andover. Bridging orthodox convictions about sin and salvation with an interest in progress, social justice, and the Kingdom of God, Harris ushered in a new era for the Calvinist institution. These changes, however, were not completely welcome. By 1886, Harris, Tucker and their fellow editors of *The Andover Review* received heresy charges for allegedly believing in the fallibility of the Bible and in Second Probation.<sup>156</sup> The significance of these controversies cannot be understated; this group of Andover professors divided the entire Congregational community. Washington Gladden, then an established leader within the Congregational Church, publicly defended the Andover professors much to the chagrin of more conservative co-religionists.<sup>157</sup> In addition to Gladden, the entire class of 1886 publicly defended the professors of the new “regime.”<sup>158</sup> In no uncertain terms, Sheldon and his classmates stated that their professors taught “those great doctrines which the evangelical church always and everywhere holds as fundamental” despite accusations otherwise.<sup>159</sup> Sheldon and his classmates assured the public that their professors taught what they, as faculty, believed; yet, Sheldon and his peers remained silent about the extent to which they, as students, agreed with biblical criticism.

While Miller correctly assessed that Sheldon left “few clues about his theological thinking at this point in his life,” Sheldon’s actions in 1886 give historians significant insight into this early period of his religious thought.<sup>160</sup> Sheldon defended his professors and later wrote for the publication in question, *The Andover Review*. Biblical criticism and science, however unorthodox it may have been, influenced Sheldon. Although the degree to which Sheldon

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<sup>156</sup> Miller, 14. In addition to potentially advocating biblical criticism, these Andover professors were accused of supporting the notion of Second, or Future, Probation. This doctrine allows for the unconverted to have the opportunity to receive salvation after death. Such an ideology directly opposed Andover theology in which an individual could receive salvation in their lifetime only. Rather than directly opposing Andover, however, these professors examined the possibility of orthodoxy permitting Second Probation. See “Editorial: Progressive Orthodoxy IV. Eschatology,” *The Andover Review: A Religious and Theological Monthly* 4. 20 (1885), 143; Williams provides a bibliography for the Andover Trial. See Williams, 196.

<sup>157</sup> Dorn, 157-158.

<sup>158</sup> “Andover Theology,” *Christian Union* 34.18 28 (October 1886), 28

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Miller, 15.

embraced these concepts is unclear, his introduction to them coincided with that of other latent social gospelers. Most notably, Walter Rauschenbusch entered Rochester Theological Seminary, another religious institution with growing liberal leanings, the same year Sheldon entered Andover. While earning his degree, Rauschenbusch consistently reaffirmed his commitment to orthodoxy in spite of his association with Rochester's most liberal professors.<sup>161</sup> By 1886, both Rauschenbusch and Sheldon completed their degrees from increasingly liberal institutions and entered the ministry defending the authenticity of their orthodoxy.

The sentimentality found in Sheldon's social gospel novels causes some historians to neglect the fact that he was grounded in New England's Congregational tradition. Not only did he attend the region's foremost theological and missionary institution, but he did so when its paradigm shifted. The significance of this time period in Sheldon's life cannot be understated, not least of all because Sheldon insisted that his creed remained unchanged since his time at Andover.<sup>162</sup> To assume that Sheldon is haphazardly placed within the social gospel movement specifically, or liberal Protestantism more generally, is to ignore historical fact. Regardless of what may be deduced about Sheldon's intellectual aptitude based on *In His Steps*, his career began at an elite Calvinist institution. In this context, Sheldon's eschewal of theological nuance appears as a direct result of his professional career having been borne out a tumultuous era in Protestant Christianity rather than out of an inability to fully comprehend doctrine. In later writings Sheldon explained that he subscribed to what he called "untheological Christianity," valuing action over formal creeds.<sup>163</sup> Sheldon's resistance to esoteric explanations of theology, then, was not a tacit alliance with revivalist-evangelicalism. This position actually reflects Sheldon's internalization of the Andover debates about the nature of sin, biblical criticism, science, and the Kingdom of God. Sheldon, like other social gospelers, did not want intellectualism to supersede their message.<sup>164</sup> The significance and demonstration of Sheldon's conception of Christianity, however, did not come to fruition until he settled into a permanent

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<sup>161</sup> In his biography of Walter Rauschenbusch, historian Paul Minus explained how faculty members were worried that Rauschenbusch was too heavily influenced by liberal ideas. Minus, 38-48.

<sup>162</sup> Charles Sheldon, *Charles M. Sheldon: His Life Story*, (New York: George H. Doran, 1925), 262.

<sup>163</sup> Miller, 15.

<sup>164</sup> Josiah Strong also believed theological debates should be avoided, especially when it prevented evangelism. See Dorothea R. Muller, "The Social Philosophy of Josiah Strong: Social Christianity and American Progressivism," *Church History* 28, no. 2 (June 1959): 187.

position in Topeka, Kansas. Sheldon's transition to the social gospel, begun at Andover, continued at his first ministerial appointment.

When Sheldon and Rauschenbusch entered the ministry in 1886 they did so one year after Josiah Strong published *Our Country*, and as Washington Gladden reached the pinnacle of his career. As historian Christopher Evans noted 1886 was "an important juncture in the history of American social Christianity."<sup>165</sup> In this pivotal year, Sheldon began his first pastorate in Waterbury, Vermont. Sheldon's time in Waterbury confirmed in his mind the unique role a minister must play within the community:

The entire compass of human experience and human sin and human need and human regeneration is the stretch of the minister's ever changing task. I have never believed that writing sermons and making calls and marrying people and burying them and delivering Commencement addresses spelled the main chapters in a minister's life. There is something more. Even the great calling of preaching and teaching religious truth does not define the minister's calling. There is more than that to it. Life on all sides, life abundantly is the minister's business.<sup>166</sup>

During his tenure at Waterbury, Sheldon tirelessly adapted his ministry to his community. Most notably, Sheldon expanded his clerical responsibilities to include fixing the town's dust problem through a resourceful use of cider bins and a wagon.<sup>167</sup> Besides municipal projects such as abating dust, Sheldon started a community garden in order to reach out to those uninterested in attending church. Upon learning that several parishioners were deaf, Sheldon started printing sermons and continued to do so throughout his career. Even at his first appointment, Sheldon mastered the social gospel desire to adapt the gospel to those in need and to the will of the community. More importantly, Sheldon understood his role as a minister to include far more than writing and reciting a sermon on Sunday. Sheldon's commitment to this form of ministry became clearer during his first winter in Topeka, Kansas.

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<sup>165</sup> Christopher Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 45.

<sup>166</sup> Charles Sheldon, *Charles M. Sheldon: His Life Story* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925) 79-80.

<sup>167</sup> Miller, 17; Sheldon, *Charles M. Sheldon: His Life Story*, 71-72.

In 1889, Sheldon moved to Topeka to serve in the newly opened Central Congregational Church, named for its hope to draw members from both Topeka's downtown and Washburn College.<sup>168</sup> In an "unusually severe" winter, Sheldon felt "a monstrous burden" for the plight of laborers.<sup>169</sup> Sheldon explained:

I felt the isolation of the preacher and the minister from the great world of labor. What did I know of it except the little experience I had on a farm as a boy? It seemed to me that the church as an organization was so remote from the working masses that it could never hope to bring them inside its fold. It was another world from the religious and denominational world into which my people and I had been born and raised, and I resented it as an artificial barrier to any thought of a human brotherhood.<sup>170</sup>

From this intense feeling, Sheldon determined the "whole industrial system" to be a "horrible blunder" and resolved to do something "to ease [his] own mental unrest."<sup>171</sup> Much of his "mental unrest" was the result of being an educated, white, middle-class minister unable to relate to the working class. Somewhat isolated in the Middle West, Sheldon felt the weight of social stratification. Convinced of the shortcomings of the capitalist system, Sheldon regretted that his theological training provided little direction in correcting these issues. In one of his early sermons in Topeka, "The Statesmanship of Christ," Sheldon confessed that when he graduated, "It was the biggest kind of a feeling of wonderment to think how little I knew that the world was in need of; and I wished I had gotten my money back. ...I tremble to think how wide of the real end of education I drove while trying for it."<sup>172</sup> Sheldon's disappointment in his formal education lay in his separation from the "common man" and from the struggles experienced by others.

Sheldon's distress over the conditions of the working class and his conviction to improve their station typified the experiences of many social gospel leaders. In the late nineteenth-century, many latent social gospelers' anxiety over capitalism converged with an exposure with poverty resulting in a sense of urgency for a socially minded gospel. Walter Rauschenbusch, for

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<sup>168</sup> Sheldon, *Charles M. Sheldon: His Life Story*, 23.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Charles Sheldon, "The Statesmanship of Christ," *Writings and Sermons* compiled by Kansas State Historical Society [Coll 222 Box 1], 6.

example, first realized that “selfless action is fundamental to Christianity” when he served as an interim pastor in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>173</sup> Rauschenbusch’s social gospel came to fruition during his first pastorate at the Second German Baptist Church of New York City near Hell’s Kitchen. Similarly, Reverdy Ransom’s first appointment in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania opened his eyes to the magnitude of destitute conditions and to the need for a gospel that alleviates the situation.<sup>174</sup> The role of this turn, however, was not fully realized until Ransom moved to Chicago and established the Institutional A.M.E Church.<sup>175</sup> Additionally, Josiah Strong’s mission in Cheyenne, Wyoming, what he called “hell on wheels,” confirmed the presence of social stratification and convinced him that Christianity must focus on correcting this phenomenon.<sup>176</sup> Based on this experience, Strong made his fear of Christianity’s irrelevance to the working class known in *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, warning that “a horizontal cleavage [existed] between social strata.”<sup>177</sup> These feelings of sympathy and fear felt by Sheldon, Rauschenbusch, and Ransom and expressed by Strong, formed the basis for the social gospel. Thus, to dismiss Sheldon for his alleged over use of sentimentality and feeling is to neglect the element common to each of these figures—a desire to connect humanity across class lines and correct disparate conditions through Christianity. Each of these key figures fully believed that once wrongs were righted and divisions unified, the world would experience the Kingdom of God. In this way, Sheldon resembles other social gospel ministers who reconsidered the gospel and its role in society based on their confrontations with social issues. Moreover, Sheldon’s life story illustrates how poignant personal experiences with poverty shaped the social gospel.

During the winter of 1890, Sheldon immersed himself for one week in eight different social communities: “streetcar operators, college students, blacks, railroad workers, lawyers, physicians, businessmen, and newspaper workers.”<sup>178</sup> While the week as a reporter inspired a character for *In His Steps*, nothing impacted Sheldon like his tenure in an African American

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<sup>173</sup> Paul M. Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch, American Reformer*, (London: Collier Macmillan, 1988), 46.

<sup>174</sup> Terrell Dale Goddard, “The Black Social Gospel in Chicago, 1896-1906: The Ministries of Reverdy C. Ransom and Richard R. Wright, Jr.,” *The Journal of Negro History* 84 (1999): 233.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

<sup>176</sup> Dorothea R. Muller, 184.

<sup>177</sup> As quoted in Muller, 197.

<sup>178</sup> Timothy Miller, *Following in His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987) 25.

community in Topeka—Tennesseetown. In the late 1870s freedmen migrated north in mass. Census records indicate that Topeka's black population jumped from 724 before the exodus to over 4,000 people by 1900.<sup>179</sup> Fueled by rumors of a free train ride, free land, or both, freedman from the South made their way to Kansas in two waves, one in 1870 and another in 1890. The Exoduster settlement in Topeka became known as Tennesseetown because a large number of migrants allegedly came from Tennessee. As the last stop on the migratory route and a hub for the Santa Fe Railroad, Topeka experienced the dubiety of larger urban centers as Southern blacks migrated north. Since Tennesseetown was adjacent to Central Congregational Church, Sheldon identified with the plight of these Topekans. As a result, Sheldon's sociological study with Tennesseetown blacks expanded from one week to four. These weeks in Tennesseetown were so profound that Sheldon spent much of his career serving there. At the heart of Sheldon's social gospel activism was an attention to the plight of Tennesseetown residents. Sheldon, like other social gospels, remained determined to actualize the Kingdom of God.

Convinced of the social deterioration caused by alcohol, Sheldon first gave lectures and sermons at speakeasies in Tennesseetown. Sheldon, however, realized that more needed to be done. Committed to education and social amelioration, Sheldon coordinated health services and established a library for Tennesseetown youth. Most notably, however, Sheldon created a kindergarten that served the local residents. In 1893 Sheldon's kindergarten opened and by 1895 it had over 200 students.<sup>180</sup> At the forefront of education reform in Topeka, Sheldon's kindergarten continued to serve Tennesseetown until the city incorporated public kindergartens in 1910. Sheldon's work led historian Paul Gutjahr to conclude that Sheldon "was an early crusader for race relations and class equality."<sup>181</sup> Such a conclusion means that Francis Peabody was not alone in "stand[ing] out as an important exception to the Social Gospel's prevailing lack of interest in Negro education and racial questions."<sup>182</sup> In fact, at the base of Sheldon's conception of the brotherhood of man was equality. In "What did Jesus Really Teach?" (1904)

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<sup>179</sup> Thomas Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1915: A Social History* [dissertation] (Princeton University, 1908), 154.

<sup>180</sup> Cox, 285.

<sup>181</sup> Paul C. Gutjahr, *Popular American Literature of the 19th Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1153.

<sup>182</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People: Second Edition* (Yale University Press, 2004), 795.

Sheldon asserted that race “is one of the sins that has led to about a much trouble and confusion as any other known to men.” Further, he charged that if people based their actions on the example of Jesus, the world would see “a new chapter of human progress.”<sup>183</sup> Sheldon was not the only reformer turning to Jesus as the primary example for creating a “brotherhood of man” yet his concern for racial equality was unique for a white social gospeler. Particularly, Sheldon cherished the times in which his white Christian Endeavor members worshiped with black Tennesseetown residents.<sup>184</sup> In his rhetoric at least, Sheldon’s insistence on a racially equal Brotherhood of Man appears comparable to that of Nannie Burroughs and Reverdy Ransom.<sup>185</sup> In his rhetoric as well as his action, Sheldon’s work in Tennesseetown paralleled the work of some black social gospellers. For instance, while Sheldon began his work in Tennesseetown, Ransom began his work on The Institutional Church and Settlement by and for African Americans in Chicago. In theory and practice, then, Sheldon’s social gospel work indicates that well known and overlooked figures may have more in common than the historiography suggests.

Sheldon’s attention to blacks in Tennesseetown was part of his larger concern for laborers and urban life more generally. Like other social gospellers, Sheldon’s concern for humanity centered on the state of capitalism and the growth of big business. For instance, Washington Gladden, saw an imbalance between society’s “self-love” and “self-sacrifice.”<sup>186</sup> This disparity, Gladden explained, caused a separation between “wage-workers and the Church.”<sup>187</sup> Initially, Sheldon blamed this disparity directly on wealthy white men: “The business men of means, of intelligence, of energy in any of our cities, have it within their power to make the cities what they ought to be.”<sup>188</sup> Rather than encourage Christians to engage in philanthropic work and charitable giving, Sheldon wanted to see businesses redistribute their wealth: “I believe the best success in mercantile and commercial life... would result in distribution among the toilers of the profits which come to men individually, rather than in the

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<sup>183</sup> Sheldon, “What did Jesus Really Teach?” 17.

<sup>184</sup> Ralph Luker, “Missions, Institutional Churches, and Settlement Houses: The Black Experience, 1885-1910,” *The Journal of Negro History* 69 (1984): 103.

<sup>185</sup> Susan Lindley refers to both Ransom and Burroughs as believing in “racial equality as a divine command.” See Lindley, “Neglected Voices,” 93.

<sup>186</sup> Washington Gladden, *Applied Christianity*, 32.; “Christianity and Wealth,” 1-37.

<sup>187</sup> Gladden, “The Wage-Workers and the Church” in *Applied Christianity*, 146-179.

<sup>188</sup> Sheldon, *Charles Sheldon Yearbook*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1902), 97.

amassing of an enormous amount of money to be used by the industrial leaders in individual acts of philanthropy."<sup>189</sup> Contrary to the historiography, Sheldon accepted socialism. Like most social gospelers, including Walter Rauschenbusch, Sheldon stopped short of supporting a systematic redistribution of wealth. Sheldon wanted businesses to voluntarily distribute their wealth to those in need. When it came to Christianity and business principles, Sheldon vehemently responded that “practicality” in business should not be based on business models but on Christian ones. In other words, “practicality” is whatever Jesus would have done, not necessarily whatever allows one to make profit and keep property. Above all else, Sheldon called businessmen to their duty toward “the salvation of the municipality.”<sup>190</sup> This salvation, for Sheldon, could not occur unless the Church could convince the wealthy and the middle-class to sacrifice on behalf of humanity. To Sheldon, “The biggest business in the world is not material, but spiritual. The biggest business in the world is changing men’s minds.”<sup>191</sup> Though the burden of change lay on individuals, Sheldon wanted the world to realize that “Success in life cannot be secured unless men work together for a common good.”<sup>192</sup> In this respect, Sheldon’s evolving economic prescription reflected not only the social gospel’s spectrum of beliefs, but also the way in which the movement eventually incorporated socialism.

Business people recognizing their responsibility to society, however, remained contingent upon proper education. Sheldon considered Christians engaged in a struggle for education on two fronts. First, Sheldon believed that Christians must endeavor to make education more accessible to all people. Second, Sheldon wanted to convince Christians of the necessity of the social gospel. Sheldon concentrated on the former within his Tennesseetown reforms. As for the latter,

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<sup>189</sup> Sheldon, *How to Succeed*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1902), 22.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>191</sup> Sheldon, “What did Jesus Really Teach?” 29. In building up to this argument Sheldon states: “We put a value on everything in this world except that which is worth the most. We have prices attached to food and clothes and books and travel, and education and pictures and amusements and houses and land, but no one has ever been able to put a real value on a human being.” (What did Jesus Really Teach, 21) This relates to Susan Curtis’ somewhat overstated thesis about social Christianity as a commodity. Though Sheldon made Jesus available to be consumed by middle-class Christians, he was more interested in making Jesus more personable than consumable. Nevertheless, Sheldon facilitated a consumer culture for young people and the middle-class generally.

<sup>192</sup> Sheldon, *How to Succeed*, 16.

Sheldon turned toward the university next door, Washburn College.<sup>193</sup> As the keynote speaker at Washburn College's graduation ceremony in 1899, Sheldon reminded the young Congregationalists of the importance of finding their calling in order to "do something worth while in God's world."<sup>194</sup> Sheldon examined ten professional fields and offered "new opportunities" for the Christian graduate to fulfill in each.<sup>195</sup> Beginning with lawyers and ending with journalists, Sheldon exhorted these graduates to adapt their professions to a Christian vision. In essence, Sheldon offered these students the opportunity to join the social gospel movement. After being influenced by Sheldon for ten years, the students at Washburn College needed little encouragement.<sup>196</sup> After all, Sheldon wrote and published *In His Steps* for them.<sup>197</sup> That Washburn students internalized these messages was paramount to Sheldon because he considered the success of the social gospel to rest on the shoulders of young people. Convincing college-aged men and women of their active role in reforming society meant, for Sheldon, the actualization of the social gospel, the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Sheldon's connection to the students at Washburn demonstrates the way in which the social gospel movement thrived among university students and faculty. Many social gospelers developed their message through higher education. For instance, Francis Peabody taught the first Christian ethics course at Harvard University. On the more radical end of the spectrum, George D. Herron served as the first Chair of Applied Christianity at Iowa College. As Peabody and Herron advanced the social gospel through their classrooms, other social gospelers expanded their tactics. For instance, Vida Scudder taught socially minded English courses at Wellesley

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<sup>193</sup> Originally named Lincoln College, Washburn College began in 1865 with a donation from Abraham Lincoln and a charter authorized by the state and the Congregational Church. After a donation from Ichabod Washburn of Worcester, Massachusetts in 1868, the college renamed itself Washburn College and modeled itself after Yale University.

<sup>194</sup> Charles Sheldon, *New Opportunities in Old Professions: An address given at Washburn College Commencement, Topeka, KS, June 14, 1899* (Chicago: John A. Ulrich, 1899), 26.

<sup>195</sup> The ten professions include: law, medicine, business, ministry, art, music, teaching, science, authorship, and journalism. Ibid, 6-25.

<sup>196</sup> Washburn students engaged in Endeavor Society activities with alacrity. Considering themselves a great crossroads for young Congregationalists across the nation, Washburn University frequently hosted Endeavor Society Conferences. Consequently, Sheldon and Washburn students considered themselves central to the social crisis of their age. See *The Washburn Mid-Continent*. volume X, no. 17 (June 1894) 17.

<sup>197</sup> Sheldon, *The History of In His Steps*, preface [no page number].

College while also participating in reform organizations.<sup>198</sup> Through the College Settlement Association Scudder found, according to Lindley, an opportunity to inspire affluent young females “to follow more closely the life of Christ,” or “to tread in his footsteps.”<sup>199</sup> Scudder was not alone in narrowing her message to a specific audience. In addition to teaching at the University of Rochester Walter Rauschenbusch also published *The Social Principles of Jesus* in order to convince college men and women of the challenges facing their generation and of the necessity of their participation in abating social ills.<sup>200</sup> While many leaders were professors, not all were. Most notably, Washington Gladden, the “father” of the social gospel movement, was an integral part of Ohio State University despite not being a professor.<sup>201</sup> Like Gladden, Sheldon had a longstanding connection with his neighboring university. In addition to Washburn College, Sheldon interacted with the students and faculty at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Though neither Gladden nor Sheldon were professors like Rauschenbusch, Herron, Peabody, and Scudder each figure illustrated a commitment to higher education and converting the educated to the social gospel.

Social gospelers connection to education revealed itself further through their public affirmation of science and sociology. Josiah Strong, for example, based his social message on the “synthesis of his social interpretation of Christianity and the scientific evolutionary philosophy of his day.”<sup>202</sup> At the same time, Strong displayed an interest in asserting that the church should avoid doctrinal debates over the social gospel and science.<sup>203</sup> Like Strong, Sheldon immersed himself in sociology, advocating that every good pastor studied the society in which he served. He also lobbied for the used of sociology to benefit humanity as a whole. In fact, Sheldon

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<sup>198</sup> Lindley, “Neglected Voices,”78.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, (New York: Association Press, 1925).

<sup>201</sup> According to Dorn, in 1902 “thirty-two of Ohio State University’s 130 faculty were parishioners or regular attendants.” One of these regular attendants was historian Arthur Schlesinger. Dorn, 90.

<sup>202</sup> Muller, 184.

<sup>203</sup> Muller points out that Gladden made a similar assertion and that both must have done so as a result of neither “study[ing] systematic theology.” Sheldon, although he studied systematized theology, wanted to avoid doctrinal debates over science and the details of his social message. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Sheldon is often criticized for not detailing exactly what Jesus would do. Though less criticized for his stance, Strong also advocated the flexibility in determining how Jesus would act in particular scenarios. Muller, 188.

considered his sociological experiment during his first winter in Kansas beneficial both in terms of education and the ministry. Cautiously noting his perspective as a minister and not a scholar, Sheldon shared his findings with students at the University of Kansas' seminary. Sociology, to Sheldon, was essential to learn the needs of one's congregation and the community at large. Sheldon believed that failure to genuinely examine local conditions stagnated the social gospel. Like other social gospelers, Sheldon was committed to modern sciences and convinced Christianity and modernity were not in opposition to one other:

“There is a progress in religion just as much as in science. If the electric light is an improvement on the tallow dip so is the application of Jesus' teaching to the social life of man an improvement on the individual salvation taught in *Thomas A Kempis* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. And the opportunities of the ministry to-day [*sic*] are simply the result of that fact, that the church has in the fullness of time come to that place where the social regeneration of the world demands the thought that once the individual salvation occupied.”<sup>204</sup>

More importantly, Sheldon understood the progress of science and of Christianity to reflect each other. More importantly, Sheldon's personal commitment to and public affirmations of science illustrate the general trend among liberal Protestants at the turn of the twentieth century.

In his dedication to modernity, Sheldon's understanding of the social gospel continually progressed. Sheldon's willingness to adapt was due, in part, to his interaction with a variety of Christian figures and literature. Sheldon considered the “divided church” as the “greatest curse of the nineteenth century.”<sup>205</sup> In Sheldon's mind, “denominationalism” was as much a culprit of social problems as class stratification. Consequently, Sheldon interacted with a broad cross-stream of Christians. As Timothy Miller pointed out, Sheldon read and contributed to a variety conservative, liberal, and moderate Christian publications including: *The Independent*, *The Kingdom*, *The Social Gospel*, *The Advance*, *The Andover Review*, and *The Christian Herald*.<sup>206</sup> He frequently wrote his contemporaries of diverse backgrounds and ideologies seeking their opinion and thanking them for their service. Miller insisted that “though Sheldon was not a

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<sup>204</sup> Sheldon, “New Opportunities,” 11.

<sup>205</sup> Sheldon, “Plea for the Unity of Christendom,” (1893) in *Sermons and Pamphlets* 2.1 compiled by Kansas State Historical Society (Topeka, Kansas), 3.

<sup>206</sup> Timothy Miller, “In Sheldon's Steps,” 308.

firebrand, he played a critical role as a protagonist, and thus helped to spread social gospel ideas of all stripes.<sup>207</sup> For Miller to cast Sheldon as completely unique in his ecumenism or broad interaction is misleading. Miller, however, is not entirely to blame. Much of the social gospel historiography obscures the fact that most social gospel leaders interacted with a variety of Christian leaders and activists. Notably, the movement's most famed figures interacted with, and even dared to be influenced by, revivalists. For instance, both Gladden and Rauschenbusch attended Dwight D. Moody's revivals and supported his evangelism.<sup>208</sup> In addition, Dorothea Muller asserted that Josiah Strong associated with "reformers of all fields."<sup>209</sup> Since Sheldon was not the only figure to interact with—or even resemble—revivalists, it is a mistake to use Sheldon's interactions with evangelicals as reason to categorize him as one.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, the similarities of Sheldon's career to other social gospellers reveals historians artificial divisions among late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Protestants.<sup>211</sup> If the boundaries between conservative and liberal Protestants were as porous as these interactions suggest, then much of the historiography's assumptions and paradigms must be reconceptualized.

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<sup>207</sup> Miller, "In Sheldon's Steps," 312.

<sup>208</sup> In 1888, about two years after he accepted his position in New York. Rauschenbusch attended one of Dwight D. Moody's revivals in Massachusetts. Washington Gladden, too, attended a Moody revival, leading historian Jacob Dorn to conclude Gladden "was not opposed to evangelism or even to the work of professional evangelists... Throughout his career he rather consistently supported evangelists or revivalists." Dorn goes on to explain that although Gladden often disagreed with Billy Sunday, it was not as a result of Sunday being a revivalist, but rather a more detailed personal conflict. See Minus, 56; Dorn, 379-380, 392-394.

<sup>209</sup> Muller, 183.

<sup>210</sup> That each of these biographers emphasize the diverse interaction that social gospellers held with their contemporaries affirms Candy Gunther Brown's assertion that the distinctions between liberal, conservative, evangelical, and non-evangelical groups in the nineteenth century are blurred. Christopher H. Evans supports Brown's claim in his biography of Walter Rauschenbusch in which he states that "two-party" Protestantism is an inadequate description of the time period. While Evans insists that Walter Rauschenbusch uniquely illustrates this claim, it is clear through this essay and essays about other of social gospellers that this was not unique to any figure. See Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Evans, xxviii.

<sup>211</sup> For an assertion of the role of evangelism within the social gospel see Matthew Bowman, "Sin, Spirituality, and Primitivism: The Theologies of the American Social Gospel, 1885-1917," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 17 (2007): 95-126.

Rather than exposing a clandestine conservatism, Sheldon's connections to evangelism reveal an overlooked aspect within the historiography. Historians writing about Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Francis Peabody take care to include their fellowship with evangelical-revivalists in order to demonstrate their broad appeal and influences. Historians' accusations of Sheldon being an "evangelical," then, have less to do with social gospelers avoiding evangelism or evangelicalism and more to do with Sheldon's revivalist-level popularity. Sheldon's application of the social gospel does not separate him from other social gospel leaders, but his success does. Historians must consider Sheldon because of his efficacy at refining and spreading the social gospel. In a closer examination of Sheldon's life and career, it becomes clear Sheldon not only belongs in the ranks of the social gospel movement but he is critical to understanding its historical trajectory. While historians remember figures like Rauschenbusch and Gladden as prophets of a respectable intellectual-theological tradition, they allot Sheldon the station of an anti-intellectual popularizer of the social gospel. In the process, historians misrepresent the categories of "liberal" and "conservative."

Sheldon's life and career best reflect the development of the social gospel movement well into the twentieth-century. Sheldon's career began with both an emphasis on evangelism and a growing interest in liberalism. Early in his career, Sheldon's experiences with poverty and social stratification led him to convince others of the need of an active gospel that could establish the Kingdom of God on earth. As his career continued, Sheldon focused his social critique on business practices and eventually embraced socialist rhetoric. This concern for the plight of the working class led Sheldon to persuade young college students to engage in their community, thereby fulfilling their Christian duty and using their education for the good of the whole. Additionally, the urgency of social gospel combined with Sheldon's liberal worldview led him to interact with a variety of Christian figures. Sheldon's career, then, is not in opposition to well-known nor lesser-known figures. Additionally, Sheldon's career is not merely a "popular," anti-intellectual version of these historical actors. Instead, Sheldon demonstrates the balance between theory and action present in all social gospelers.<sup>212</sup> As historian Paul Gutjahr asserted, Sheldon

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<sup>212</sup> This notion of a balance between theory and action comes from Susan Lindley's "Neglected Voices." Lindley argues that historians must examine the praxis of the social gospel in order to bring "neglected voices into the fray. This is not to say that theologians of the social gospel were not involved in its praxis, but rather that "the balance of action and theory was different" among its proponents. Lindley, "Neglected Voices," 76.

“personified the Social Gospel claim that devout, hardworking Christians could indeed establish the Kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>213</sup> As both a “great man” and a “neglected voice, Sheldon reveals the rich tapestry of thought and action found in the social gospel movement.

Within a liminal space in the historiography, Sheldon illustrates the problems of this historiographical trajectory--two mutually exclusive sides of single story. Focusing on white clergy or on "recovering" voices is problematic in clarifying the history of the social gospel movement not least of all because a full examination of Sheldon's life exposes the specious historical explanations raised by both endeavors. Furthermore, Sheldon opens the historical dialogue to reconsider its long-standing ambiguities. The history of the movement is better served by examining Sheldon because the tensions experienced in his history and in the historiography can help to explain the enigma of the social gospel movement. If, as historian Susan Lindley asserted, "historical integrity thus demands we pay attention to what has been overlooked," then historians must give greater attention--and greater seriousness--to the persistent role Sheldon and his fiction played in the social gospel.<sup>214</sup> For both reflect the legacy of the social gospel. On the one hand, secular reform absorbed the project closest to Sheldon's heart, his Tennesseetown kindergarten. In 1910, for instance, the city of Topeka assumed control of the kindergarten. Sheldon's kindergarten also relates to the social gospel's relationship to the Civil Rights Movement. In particular, Sheldon helped one of his favorite students, Charles Scott, enroll in Washburn University's Law School. Scott and his son, Charles Sheldon Scott became prosecutors in civil rights litigation, famously *Brown v. Board of Education (Topeka) [1954]*,<sup>215</sup> In this way, Sheldon's social gospel praxis contributed to multiple waves of reform throughout the twentieth century.<sup>216</sup> On the other hand, Sheldon's most famous contribution to the social

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<sup>213</sup> Gutjahr, 1153.

<sup>214</sup> Susan Lindley, "Deciding Who Counts: Toward A Revised Definition of the Social Gospel," in *The Social Gospel Today*, Christopher Evans, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>215</sup> Timothy Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift of Tennesseetown," *Kansas History* 9 (1986): 136-137; Miller, *Following in his steps*, 57.

<sup>216</sup> See Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White American Racial Reform, 1885-1912*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Ronald C. White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel, 1877-1925*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*, (Temple University Press, 1976).

gospel movement—*In His Steps*—became a central feature of evangelical consumer culture.<sup>217</sup> In his desire to make the historical Jesus central to Protestants’ ethical conduct and social vision, Sheldon set the stage for marketing Jesus.<sup>218</sup> Sheldon’s attempt to make Jesus accessible and intelligible helped make Christianity consumable and profitable. In this respect, Sheldon must be included in the mainstream of social gospel thought not only because he made the social gospel popular, but also because his career contains the disparate and often contradictory results of the movement. Even Sheldon’s eventual dismissal as a trite, sentimental evangelical Protestant symbolizes the pointed critiques from neo-orthodoxy. In fact, the critiques from neo-orthodoxy land squarely on Sheldon’s social gospel model. Although his sentimentality, utopianism, and evangelism parallel the characteristics of other social gospelers, Sheldon’s historical legacy bears the burdens of its failures. That Sheldon’s solutions for social reform proved unfeasible proves less about Sheldon and more about the rejection of the social gospel itself. This fact is obscured, rather than examined, through the historiography when it eulogizes both “great” and “neglected” figures. In his disappointments as much as his accomplishments, Sheldon epitomizes the legacy of the social gospel and the possibilities for its historiography. By sitting at a crossroads, in his own time as well as in the current historiography, Sheldon complicates the social gospel movement, summoning us to reflection.

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<sup>217</sup> See Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture*, (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

<sup>218</sup> Though neither dwell on Sheldon, see R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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