

was the name of Charles M. Sheldon's spectacularly successful publication of an 1896 series of stories written for &, Sunday evenings read to, the Christian Endeavor youth of Central Congregational Church, Topeka KS (a church he pastored 35 years, its first pastor, beginning in 1888).

Says Sheldon in a self-published ("Privately Published") pamphlet (1938 personal copyright), "The time and occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Church seems to me to be a fitting occasion for the history of *In His Steps* to be told, as readers all over the world keep asking questions about it. That is the reason for the narrative that now follows." A photo portrait of him faces the title-page, on which he wrote (in my copy, which I'm giving to the Congregational Historical Society: he was of that denomination), in a shaky hand, "Very Cordially Charles M. Sheldon Topeka, Kansas October 8, 1942"--&, on the cover of the 23-page booklet, "Charles M. Sheldon." (A Lutheran college student, Ernest A. Bergeson, asked Sheldon to autograph this copy, which a few months ago--now, an eminence grise among Lutherans--Ernie turned up ["as I was cleaning up my files"] & gave to me for archiving or "throw it out" "if it is of no real importance.")

A few NOTES from the booklet: (1) During the church's first month (meeting "in a small hall above a meat market"), he "organized a Christian Endeavor society of one hundred and fifty young people, most of them college and high school students." (In 25 years, 25 of them became "missionaries and teachers to foreign lands.") "It was to this youth group that the story *In His Steps* was first read." (2) Because of a defect in the copyright, the author got almost nothing--but the unhindered publishing led soon to the distribution of millions of copies in scores of languages. Publishing authorities told him that (p18-) "the book has had the largest sale of any book ever printed with the exception of the Bible." This "emphasizes what I have always believed..., that religion is the most interesting subject known to the human race, and that the standards of Jesus in human conduct are the greatest we can ever know." (This exemplarist Christology was widespread--due to the influence of the Beechers & Bushnell--among Congregational clergy: Jesus was more prophet than priest or king. But here's the Christus Victor end of the pamphlet: The whole experience & history of the book has "deepened my own belief that the people of the world, in spite of war and hate and selfishness in many forms, are at heart religious, and that in the end Jesus will conquer and draw all men up unto Himself. In that faith I expect to continue and try to walk 'In His Steps'.")

1 Whence "In His Steps"? In the NT, "steps" is used only once in reference to Jesus: 1 Peter 2.21--the Greek word meaning footsteps resulting in footprints or tracks, a (predetermined) trail; (in papyri) a (caravan) route. (The verb on this root means to search out.) Here's a literal picture of what it means to be a "follower" of Christ, who has "left behind" "for us" an "example" (all four expressions being in this verse). The Greek for "example" means, literally, lightly written letters ("written under") to be traced later; a writing-copy; in 2 Mac. (2.28), ornamentation added after architect & builder have finished the house.

If the verse is removed from its context, it can support what Jefferson did, reducing Jesus to moralist: Jesus is an ethical model, & to "follow" him is to take his behavioral suggestions seriously enough to try to live them. Liberal Christianity was/is guilty of this reductionism. "What did Jesus do?" is back-burnered to "What did Jesus say?"--which is transposed to "What would Jesus say?"--which becomes WWJD ("What would Jesus do?"). This liberal-modernist thinning of the person/mis-sion/message of Jesus was attacked as early as 1930 in Amos Wilder's Harv. PhD dissertation, published later as THE ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY OF JESUS; & by Reinhold Niebuhr in his AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS (1935). But the split has persisted to our day in the many versions of "the historical Jesus" emerging from the Jesus Seminar.

2 But we get a shock when we restore Example Jesus to its context. TEV of verse 16 (of 1 Peter 2) calls on free Christians to "live as God's slaves." What about owned Christians (i.e., Christian slaves)? Vv.18-25 is addressed to them.

Their submission must include "complete respect" in obedience even to "harsh" owners. "God will bless you for this, if you endure the pain of undeserved suffering" (not to speak of any "beatings you deserve for having done wrong"). Christ "committed no sin," but look what God did with Christ's undeserved sufferings: "by his wounds you have been healed"! For "Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness." "You were like sheep that had lost their way, but now [by Christ's vicarious & undeserved death "for us"] you have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of your souls." So "if you endure suffering even when you have done right, God will bless you for it. It was to this that God called you, for Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example [of loyal service in spite of undeserved suffering], so that you would follow in his steps."

One reason for the rapid spread of Christianity was that it produced startlingly superior slaves (outwardly owned by their masters, inwardly [1] free in obedience to the Master-Lord Christ, & [2] "in Christ" no human being's inferior [Ga.3.28]). Instead of attacking the institution of slavery, Jesus inhabited it: Phil.2.7, as it were nonviolently destroyed it from the inside. Christianity transformed the Mediterranean world from the bottom up. So, do we know where now to look for his footprints, that we may walk in them? Says Rein.Niebuhr (ibid., pp45-46), "the rigor of Jesus' position," against ascetic & prudential-naturalistic ethics, is seen in that (as in the case of the superior slave, I add) "both resistance and resentment are forbidden. The self is not to assert its interests against those who encroach upon it, and not to resent the injustice done to it."

3 In the NRSV wording of 1P.2.18, God became a slave (the incarnation) "for us" (the atonement by vicarious suffering), providing us "an example" of indefatigable life-for-others ("others" in Gk. "kat-all-agé" [atonement], Lat. "altr-uism"). So to live, being "aware of God," who "judges justly," we have "God's approval" as we "follow in his [Christ's] steps."

That is the literary context. The historical context is that Christians in the Roman Empire had to live (vs.11) as "aliens [at home in no worldly culture] and exiles [from another homeland]." Called "evildoers" (vs.12), live so honorably that the worldly will "see...and glorify God." As God's slaves (NRSV "servants"), "live as free people" (vs.16) as you (vs.13) "accept the authority of every human institution." The gospel by infiltration rather than confrontation: both appropriate.

4 1 Peter is not (as is Marcus J. Borg, p54 of THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY [HarperSF/03]) "indifferent to the factual questions surrounding the [Gospels'] stories [such as whether the empty tomb was 'literally' or only 'really' true]." Not historicism, but historicity, grounds our following in Jesus' "footprints" as (vs.9 TEV) "the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who has called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light." But for Borg (p89), it's only for us Christians that Jesus is "the decisive revelation of God"; & the Trinity appears (in the book) only once, viz. in "the second person of the Trinity." But (p54) "To affirm that he [Jesus] is Lord is to deny all other lords."

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