

BEYOND THEOLOGY

What Would Jesus Do?

Host: Have you ever heard the question “What Would Jesus Do?” Do you know where it came from? How does it apply to the world in which we live today? Stay with us and you’ll find out.

Host (Following title sequence): “What would Jesus Do?” is a question that pops up frequently in American culture. You might hear it in a movie or see it on a t-shirt. You sometimes see it in its abbreviated form – four simple letters ... WWJD. It’s been popular among young Christians, who’ve displayed it as an expression of faith and relied upon it as a way to approach life. Although it may be not as popular as it was 20 or 25 years ago, it’s still around and it still gives people something to think about. Young people often begin to think more seriously about matters of ethics and morality as they gain more independence. At Harvard University, students have been outspoken in their demands for a meaningful education, prompting the university to develop a curriculum that includes moral reasoning.

Rev. Peter Gomes (Memorial Church, Harvard University): In our desire to be even-handed and not evangelistic in any sense any more, we raise all the great issues of the day, but we don’t presume to preach to people -- the university doesn't presume to preach to people -- to say this is a view better than that or this is what you should do as opposed to that, do this and don’t do that. We don’t ... We lay out all the options and hope our students are smart enough to figure out what the best thing is. And our students complain about that. Our students say “What should we do about AIDS in Africa? What should we do about the fact that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer? What should we do about corruption in public life? Don’t just describe us ... don’t just show us the tools, give us some sense of what we might do.” So there is a kind of hunger for guidance, a kind of thirst for some sense of values here. And every institution you look at, whether it be the stock market or the military or even the churches have these moral dilemmas in modern time and they of themselves seem incapable of addressing the situation. So what's an 18 year old to do in this setting? And how can the university serve to help bring up a generation of morally sensitive and acute young leaders?

Harvey Cox (Harvard Divinity School): Fifteen years ago now the Harvard faculty decided they needed some courses in what they called moral reasoning. And they asked me to give a course on Jesus because somebody thought well Jesus has been a fairly significant moral influence for a lot of people over many centuries, maybe there ought to be one option that students could choose among all the others. So I designed a course called “Jesus and the Moral Life.”

Narrator: Professor Harvey Cox writes about this course in a book called “When Jesus Came to Harvard.” He taught the course many different times over a period of fifteen

years, beginning in the early 1980s. At first, he wasn't quite sure how to proceed, knowing that he would be addressing students from diverse religious and secular orientations.

Harvey Cox: But I found something very interesting, which is that Jesus remains a very, very significant, popular, compelling figure for students in a number of different religions and even students who don't consider themselves religious. And therefore there wasn't any sense of resentment. There were Jewish students in the course who saw him as part of the tradition of the prophets. There were Buddhists. The Dalai Lama wrote a book on Jesus while the course was going on. The Muslim students said, of course, Jesus is in the Koran. So it was a fabulously interesting discussion in which students who had all these different understandings of Jesus were not only in the course listening but were interacting in these discussion sections.

Narrator: In the discussion groups for this course, some of the students brought up the question "What Would Jesus Do?" -- asking if that wouldn't be the best way to approach any moral dilemma. The question had become a popular one circulating within Christian youth groups.

Harvey Cox: Oh it came up, yeah, it did frequently. "What Would Jesus Do?" ... it's as easy as that. You just ask yourself. And I said 'well yes, that's the first step. But now here you are in a discussion group with 8 or 9 or 10 or 15 other students, some of whom also believe that what would Jesus do is a good way of going about it but they think he would do something different from what you think he would do.' So that's the beginning of an education here. The beginning of an education is when what you think is a simple answer to a dilemma turns out to be not as simple as you think.

Narrator: The Harvard students who raised this question may not have known much about the origins of the "WWJD movement" of the 1980s and '90s. It's been traced to a Christian youth group in Ohio inspired by a book called *In His Steps*. This book has been around for quite some time, as the Reverend Peter Gomes can attest. Growing up in Plymouth, Massachusetts, he remembers it from his Sunday school classes there.

Peter Gomes: I can't claim to remember a great deal about it, but I do remember that in the Sunday school ... the First Baptist Church 50 years ago, maybe even longer ... *In His Steps* is one of the books that had high currency. It must've been ... I don't know what edition it would've been in 1949 or 1950, but it certainly was current among my generation of Sunday school kids. And there was a sense that even though the church I grew up in was mildly evangelical, singing gospel hymns and so on and so forth, that the social gospel really did count for something -- that we were expected not to just work and pray for our personal salvation, but that there were consequences to be lived out in the world. A Christian was somebody who didn't just believe certain things, a Christian was somebody who did certain things in a way that would be pleasing to Jesus Christ. We were to live and walk literally in his steps. And that has still shaped the way I think about the Christian faith to this very day.

Narrator: *IN HIS STEPS* was published long before Rev. Gomes encountered it in Sunday school. Written by Charles M. Sheldon, a Congregational Church minister in Topeka, Kansas, the book came out in 1897. It wasn't long before Charles Sheldon became a well-known figure ... at home and abroad.

Tim Miller (Professor of Religious Studies, University of Kansas): He was a household name. He was known worldwide. His books were sold in dozens of countries all over the world -- millions of copies all over. I mean, just tremendously influential for a few decades.

Narrator: A professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, Tim Miller has written a biography about Charles Sheldon, noting his connection with the social gospel movement of the 19th century.

Tim Miller: Sheldon saw himself very much as a part of the social gospel movement, which is usually dated from maybe the 1860s or '70s into the first couple of decades of the 20th century. It was really just raging, shall we say, at the time that Sheldon came to Topeka. The problems that spawned the social gospel movement had really become evident. The social problems that gave rise to it, I would say, were things like unfair treatment of labor. This is a time of the beginning of labor unions and the corporations stoutly resisted unions. I mean, there was a lot of violence connected to that, but the rights of laborers were not secure. Urban life -- modern cities were being built up and urban life was just wretched for people who were poor -- the down and outers. I mean, all the stories of urban tenement housing and stuff, really foul housing -- those are abundant and things were not good there. This is the atmosphere that Sheldon came in to and he very much felt himself a part of it. He's not usually treated as a major figure, because he didn't write theoretical or really politically activist works on it. Rather his contribution was, I would say, popularization of some of the ideas. Sheldon's main claim to fame was his fiction writing. And if you look at his fiction in the light of the social gospel movement, there's a lot of it there.

Narrator: Rev. Sheldon developed his fictional "sermon stories" as a way to lure his parishioners to Sunday evening services. In the days before radio, television and Hollywood, he provided a unique form of entertainment, which kept them coming back week after week, as one of Sheldon's successors at Topeka's Central Congregational Church can attest.

Rev. Kathy Timpany (Former Pastor, Central Congregational Church): As far as I understand it, they had a traditional Sunday night service and it was beginning to lag in attendance. And so he said, 'what can I do to increase attendance?' And he developed the idea of that serial storyline. The one called *In His Steps* was just one of several. He wrote many, many of those. But it was the one that took off and became popular. And so he would ... in the place of a sermon, he would read one chapter of the story as it was unfolding. And come to the end of the chapter, and tune in same time, you know, next week. See you back here. So it was a way of getting people to keep coming, I think. And it was working. So the *In His Steps* story simply became the most popular one.

[Excerpt from stage play]

Man at Door: Pastor Maxwell?

Pastor Maxwell: That's right.

Man at Door: May I come in?

Pastor Maxwell: Certainly. What can I do...

Man: Well, I'm out of a job, sir, and I was wondering if maybe you could...

Pastor Maxwell: I'm sorry. I don't think there's any way....

Tim Miller: *In His Steps* is a simple, straightforward story. That's one reason for its popularity, I think -- not hard to grasp. It's also got some good moments of drama in it. The story starts out with a tramp, and this ties into the social gospel themes that Sheldon was fond of. This fellow's technologically unemployed. He'd been a printer, but he'd been put out of work by the linotype. And so here he is unemployed, and he has a child to support and he's desperate. He doesn't know what to do. And so as a tramp he walks in to this very comfortable, fictional church, which bears a remarkable resemblance to Central Church in Topeka, and interrupts the service and gives a passionate speech. The tramp's speech, actually, in many ways is the high point of the book, I think -- quite a nice dissertation on social problems. But he really challenges the people in the church. Says 'here, look at this. You have the finest talent money can buy, the most beautiful building you can build, but is that what Jesus would want? Is that what Jesus would have you do? Your religion is hollow. It's empty.' Anyway, quite a dramatic speech and then right at the high point of it, the tramp collapses. A few days later he dies. The people are really struck by it, and so they decide that they will take it to heart. And the central piece of it becomes asking the question 'what would Jesus do?' A group of people within the church take a pledge that every time they reach any kind of moral confusion, any kind of moral decision, a turning point in life, they will stop and ask the question, what would Jesus do? And then as best they can, try to do that.

Kathy Timpany: A Victorian melodrama is really what it is ... with all the proper characters, you know. It's a hero's tale.

[Excerpt from staged *In His Steps* play]

Pastor Maxwell: Like Saul on the road to Damascus, we must feel our way in the darkness. Like Saul, we pray for the light that we might see and walk in his steps. Amen.

Philip Grecian (Playwright): He wasn't writing for a major audience. What he did was he would write these ... he called them sermon stories, and he would.... He had been

told that ... when he came on at Central Congregational, he'd been told 'You have to preach two sermons every day, every Sunday.' And he said, 'Well, I've said everything I've got to say at the earlier service. What can I do in the evening?' So, he came up with this idea of doing what amounts to a cliffhanger, long before the movie serials even existed. And he would write a chapter; he would read it in the evening service; and then he would leave it someplace and say, 'Now if you want to see what happens next, you're going to have to come back next week.' Once he got a few ahead, he would begin to send these chapters to a religious newspaper, which would publish them a chapter at a time. And then when he had them all together, he'd put them between covers and make a book out of them.

Tim Miller: *In His Steps* as a book sold quite respectably well in its first edition, which The Advance Publishing Company put out in Chicago. It was a year or two after it came out that someone figured out that, lo and behold, the copyright is defective. The reason was that *The Advance* magazine didn't copyright anything, and by publishing it without copyright, that puts it in the public domain. So it never was copyrighted. And with that, things went wild. It was already popular, but once you can print it without any royalties or any constraints, people picked it up and it was just published by dozens of publishers, became a smash best seller. Published abroad in something like 30 languages. English editions in every English-speaking country in the world -- tens of millions of copies probably. We don't know because there's no overall record.

Huston Smith (Religious Scholar): I suspect that may have been the most read religious book, apart from the Bible and the religious texts of the other religions of the 20th Century. I can't prove that, but I cannot think of another that had as wide a circulation.

Philip Grecian: It is said that he made no money at all. He made some. Grosset & Dunlap, which was one of the biggest publishers, they gave him I think \$5,000, which was quite a bit of money during that century. But for the most part it wound up published by anyone who wanted to publish it in many, many, many languages and he didn't realize much money from it. But I don't believe that he cared.

Tim Miller: Sheldon took the notion of following Jesus very seriously. You should do this no matter what the cost to yourself, and there might be considerable cost in personal comfort and money, what have you. I think it's fair to say Sheldon himself sacrificed a lot in his life. He could have lived it up, you know. He was a prominent, successful guy. He never did at all. He absolutely stuck with his ideals and his chores and continued to do the work he thought was right practically 'til his dying day. So sacrifice very much a part of it. We're not doing this to make ourselves comfortable, to make our lives easy. We are demanded, in fact, to do the opposite.

Pastor Maxwell at podium (Scene from IN HIS STEPS): For hereunto were ye called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Kathy Timpany: It's not what we're living today, you know. I've often thought how would you really write a contemporary version of that? The demons have changed, you know. It was demon rum there. The understanding of human beings has changed a little bit. But the basic story of greed and power and rationalization -- how smart people can rationalize anything for themselves. That's still there. There's a universality to that story, which is why it's still around. He captured, I think, the basic struggle in the human heart toward greed and power.

Phil Grecian: There have been versions of it written for children where all of the verbiage is simplified with pictures and that sort of thing. Almost everything you can think of as a storytelling medium has been a vehicle for *In His Steps*. It seems that the story touches people in a very specific way and it seems it will never die.

[excerpt from play]

Pastor Maxwell: May the grace and peace of our lord go with you as you follow in his steps.

(Fade to black)

Narrator: People of all ages and dozens of different nationalities have read *In His Steps*. The central question it poses -- "What Would Jesus Do?" -- has maintained a visible presence in our society, adorning everything from bracelets to bumperstickers and finding its way into films and TV shows ... although not necessarily in its original form. The question has made a significant impact on the lives of many Americans, often beginning at an early age. Peter Gomes remembers how it happened with him....

Peter Gomes: Every week in Sunday school we would have to answer a series of questions, 'Now what happened to you during the week?' And you would tell your little adventures as a sixth grader or whatnot, and then of course the implied question was 'Well, what would Jesus think of what you did and what would Jesus do in your situation, and what would Jesus have you do?' And we sort of figured that out -- that I punched out the kid next door, now Jesus wouldn't have liked that and he wouldn't have done that and I'm sorry I did it but the little kid deserved it -- we had all of that kind of ethical analysis. And we were eight, ten, twelve years old, I think. It was not too early to be thinking in those terms.

Dr. James Forbes (Riverside Church, New York City): In the course of time, those of us who learned that we're supposed to figure out what would Jesus want us to do experienced that sometimes those words were used with respect to 'what does mamma want us to do' or 'what does the community want us to do?' and 'what do the powerful want us to do?' So that many times the words "what would Jesus do" introduced the tension between self-affirmation or conforming to the expectations of those who were the official diviners or definers of truth and goodness and beauty.

Robert Bellah (Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley): Of course, the notion of the imitation of Christ is deeply imbedded in the Christian tradition, you know, for centuries. So again, it's a perfectly legitimate Christian question to ask -- what would Jesus do in a given situation?

Stephen Prothero (Professor of Religion, Boston University): People had been asking what would Jesus do for a long time, but there's a certain point when Christians started to feel ... born-again Christians ... started to feel comfortable doing that in public, you know, and wearing WWJD bracelets and posing these questions.

Robert Wuthnow (Center for the Study of Religion, Princeton University): What to do as a teenager, let's say, about friends, sex, drugs, career choices, relationships with parents. All of those were questions that begged for guidance. And so a little slogan like that sort of reminded people that here's a model in the life of Jesus.

Sr. Joan Chittister (Benedictine Sisters of Erie): If Jesus is the model of the Christian life ... certainly of the monastic life, then what other question can I possibly ask as I go through my own daily routine or my own cultural situation?

President Ronald Reagan (Inaugural address, January 20, 1981): I'm told that tens of thousands of prayer meetings are being held on this day, and for that I'm deeply grateful. We are a nation under God, and I believe that God intended for us to be free. It would be fitting and good, I think, if on each inaugural day in future years it should be declared a day of prayer.

Stephen Prothero: The interesting thing about the WWJD movement for me and its revival in really the late 20th Century is I think it comes about as a result of the rise of the religious right and the election of Ronald Reagan and the emergence of evangelicals as a political force and their emergence out of invisibility into the public space.

Robert Wuthnow: This idea of what would Jesus do certainly became part of the popular culture. I certainly remember seeing people with wristbands ... WWJD on their wristbands or tattooed on the back of their hands or written in their palm. Now what did that mean exactly? For some it meant being a good person, trying to avoid evil, trying to avoid obvious moral pitfalls. For others it meant being loving, showing oneself to be a good neighbor, following the Golden Rule. And in other cases, I suspect it may have actually meant being a witness, being a Christian witness, evangelizing, telling others the good news about Jesus.

Stephen Prothero: So this is an effort to really follow Jesus. And it's in this model of walking in his footsteps -- that he's the leader and we're supposed to follow and do what he does. And of course, now that question we apply many of us to everything in American culture. How would Jesus vote? What would Jesus drive? What diet plan would Jesus use? All these questions now seem relevant to us.

Kathy Timpany: The critique I have of the WWJD phenomenon is that it is often rendered too simplistic -- that there is a reductionist thinking that is applied, a reductionist theology. It's so simple -- four little letters and a question mark. And therefore we can solve all the world's problems and make everybody behave, you know. Doesn't work that way. It's much more complicated than that. And yet human beings want little acronyms and things we can hold on to, you know. And so I think it's a very useful thing, if we don't think that that's all there is to it.

Narrator: In the discussion groups for "Jesus & the Moral Life" -- the course he taught at Harvard -- Harvey Cox often witnessed students struggling with complicated issues that are difficult to resolve. It was not uncommon for a student to make reference to the question "What Would Jesus Do?" as they tried to get a handle on a challenging situation. But in many cases, they found that it wasn't so clear what Jesus *would* do, especially in regard to situations that didn't exist at the time he lived.

Harvey Cox: Yeah, that's exactly right. I remember about the second or third year some students said 'well, did Jesus ever have to face whether to put his mother Mary in a home for the elderly when she didn't want to go?' People are always going through this -- 'well mom's fine, but she can't get around the house too well and she is getting a little forgetful. And she did have a fall last year, and we really would like to help her and put her in this. But she doesn't want to go, she's digging her heels in, what do we do?' That's a very serious moral issue. And it isn't at all clear what Jesus would have done about that -- not clear. I can name 10 other issues where it became evident to the people who thought that 'what would Jesus do' gave you an instant answer had to say well it's going to require a little more than that. It's not a bad place to start.

Peter Gomes: I've modified WWJD. I say 'what would Jesus have me do?' I mean, what Jesus would do and what I would do may well be two different things. Jesus was much nicer than I am; Jesus was much more patient than I am; Jesus accomplished many more remarkable things than I can. So it doesn't do for me to say what would Jesus do -- he'd always do the right thing. He's supposed to; he's Jesus. But what would he have me do in my circumstances with my limitations? So I've modified that saying. If I was going to reintroduce Sheldon's book under my own name to a new generation, it would be what would Jesus have me do? And that puts the responsibility on me and not on Jesus.

James Forbes: So "what would Jesus do" -- I think about consulting with the spirit and basically thinking 'what should I do if I am trying to be a faithful Christian in this situation?' And the answer is not nearly as precise as it might seem to some other people. It basically requires my cultivating sensitivity to the guidance of the spirit. And since I could often use what would Jesus do like our parents did, meaning what do I want to do, it is better to ask that question in community because that protects Jesus against my projecting my wishes and using him as a kind of stamp of approval on what I've already decided or to what a certain segment of my population has decided. So for me, those words have always required a higher level of responsibility for seeking to take the eternal

principle revealed in Jesus and applying it now and take the responsibility for what I do in my time in relationship to what I've discerned in the life of Jesus.

Robert Bellah: Jesus was not preaching the easy life. He was asking people to do some very tough things. And most Americans, I suspect, if they really took seriously what would Jesus do in this situation, would find it pretty tough. Because what Jesus would do in the situation that we're in right now would be very different from what most of American culture says to do.

Narrator: The current situation in America is much different than the world in which Jesus lived ... or even the world in which Charles Sheldon lived when he created *In His Steps*. With people from all parts of the world living here, all the different religious traditions on Earth have converged, becoming part of our multicultural and pluralistic society. Even though it may be well-intentioned, a question like "What Would Jesus Do" can appear to exclude people of other faiths and denigrate their beliefs, as Diana Eck, director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard, explains....

Diana Eck (The Pluralism Project, Harvard University): One of the great new questions ... new and old question ... but an important question for every Christian today is how we actually understand religious difference -- how we understand the presence and power of God ... the one we call God ... in the lives and faith of people of other faiths. And that's a question that's not only ours as Christians; it's a question that Buddhists ask; it's a question that Muslims and Jews and Hindus ask as well because we live in proximity to each other. We don't live in self-contained units. We live in a world in which people of faith are continually asking questions about their own faith in relation to science, about their own faith in relation to violence and about their own faith in relation to the reality they can observe of faith outside their own tradition.

Huston Smith: And that poses a new problem, namely, how can one be faithful to one's own tradition, preferably even deepen one's grounding in one's own religion, while yet being open to other religions.

James Forbes: Like Jesus says, "Other sheep I have who are not of this fold." And the question is -- does he mean that all of these others 'I, too, must come to them but that they must have a Christian calling card and a membership card before my love or the love of God can be sent to them?' I'm not thinking that God is that much of a discriminator. I do believe that God has revealed God's self through Jesus the Christ. I believe that I learn some things through Buddhists, through Hindus, through Sikhs, through Zoroastrians and other folks as well.

Karen Armstrong (Mythologist): At basis, they're all saying the same thing, and that's the richness of it. And I was with the Dalai Lama about a year ago, and he was saying 'really, there's no point in converting from one religion to another. They're all the same.' He even said that to an American girl who had converted to Buddhism. He said, 'you might just as well have stayed a Christian.' They all teach the same ... compassion is the

key. ‘My religion,’ he said on another occasion, ‘is kindness.’ And that’s what the religion of Jesus was, I think.

Phil Grecian: And whether you’re a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew or no religion at all, it’s about the Golden Rule. It’s about trying to make your fellow man’s life a little easier by doing what you think is the best thing – ‘do unto others.’

Karen Armstrong: The Golden Rule was propounded at the outset of all of our great world traditions. The first person to enunciate it as far as we know was Confucius, who said it was the single thread that runs through all his teaching – ‘Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.’ And he said ‘look into your own heart; discover what it is that gives you pain; and then refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else. And that means a constant, intelligent comparing of others to ourselves, which is a transcendence. If every time we were tempted to say something terrible about an annoying colleague or an ex-wife or a nation with whom we are at war, and then say ‘how would we like that said about us?’ ... and refrained. In that moment, we would have gone beyond ourselves and experienced what the Greeks called “ecstasy” – ekstasis ... stepping outside is what that word ecstasy means – stepping outside the confines of the self. And if you did that, as Confucius said all day and every day, then you would be in a state of continuous ekstasis. And that wouldn’t mean you’d be having an exotic trance or visions or anything. That’s a rather vulgar way of thinking about ecstasy. But you would be getting rid of self, as St. Paul said – kenosis, because you’re dethroning yourself from the center of your world and putting another there.

[excerpt from play]

Tramp: I don’t want empty charity. It’s no good for either one of us. It’s too easy for you, and I could get used to it. I’ll go.

Narrator: Playwright Philip Grecian has adapted Charles Sheldon’s book *In His Steps* for the stage. Grecian himself plays the role of the displaced printer who’s desperately seeking a job.

Tramp: First Peter 2:21

Pastor Maxwell: What?

Tramp: First Peter 2:21 ... another favorite Bible verse.

Narrator: Even though his character quotes a verse from the Bible, Grecian maintains that the story itself is not an attempt to convert people of other faiths to Christianity.

Phil Grecian: And that I think is why the book and our play continue to be so strong, because it’s not about proselytizing. It’s about being a good person. And it was very, very well thought out on Sheldon’s part to have thought about this. Because if you read the book, there is nothing in the book that proselytizes for the Christian religion. It’s

about living your life as Jesus would. The book doesn't say it but it implies it -- whether you believe Jesus was the Son of God or a prophet or whomever.

(Fade to black and back up)

Rev. Kathy Timpany (at pulpit, reading): “This is my command – that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this – to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Narrator: At Central Congregational – the church where Charles Sheldon preached in Topeka, the Reverend Kathy Timpany served as a minister for more than fifteen years. Even though she had grown up in Topeka, this had not been the church of her youth and she wasn't very familiar with Sheldon's work. As she prepared to move on to another church in a distant city, she reflected upon Sheldon's legacy and how little she knew about it when she first arrived.

Rev. Kathy Timpany: I accepted the call to come here particularly for the call itself -- it seemed like a good match. And I knew it was Charles Sheldon's church, but I didn't know anything more. So after I got here, I began to investigate. And at that time ... what happened was the WWJD phenomenon began to kick up its heels around the country, and most of the people here had no idea, really, that the genesis of that was here. And so we began to lift that up a little bit, and say if we are going to be the church of Charles Sheldon and hold on to that legacy, we ought to know the history a little more.

Narrator: Charles Sheldon's father, Stewart Sheldon, was also a Congregational minister. He was preaching in Wellsville, New York, when Charles was born in 1857. While Charles was still a young boy, the family moved west to Dakota Territory, where they built a simple, two-story cabin on 160 acres of rolling prairie.

Tim Miller: And he spoke very fondly in many cases of his prairie upbringing. He talked about the great values that he'd learned, the great sense of self-reliance living out on the frontier. He befriended some of the local American Indians, and I think that had a lot to do with his remarkable racial tolerance. I mean, for his time, he was way out ahead of the crowd on racial tolerance. Anyway, he wrote repeatedly, very fondly of those formative prairie years. When he was in high school finally, he did get a chance to go back east and to go prep school, and kind of got back into, you might say, into civilization after being on the frontier. And then he went to Andover Theological School in Massachusetts, which was undergoing quite a bit of change at that time and I think exposed him to a lot of new ideas, new ways of thinking.

Narrator: Sheldon spent three years at Andover, where he was immersed in what was considered to be a new, progressive form of theology, which emphasized the notion that God participates in human affairs. As he moved on to his first pastorate in the small town of Waterbury, Vermont, Sheldon concentrated on improving living conditions there, playing an active role in the community. His tenure in Vermont was relatively brief,

however, and he soon found himself heading back west after he became enamored with a young woman whose family had recently moved to Kansas.

Tim Miller: The young woman he met in Vermont had everything to do with moving him to Topeka. Her father -- Miriam Sheldon's father -- was a banker here in Topeka, and they had a summer home up in Vermont and some family up there. So they would visit there, and Sheldon got to know her there. And when this group of people from First Congregational Church in downtown Topeka came along and wanted to start a new congregation in the growing western part of town, of course, it soon becomes a matter of trying to find a minister. Where do you find it? And the man who became Sheldon's father-in-law, Mr. Miriam, had heard him in the church in Vermont and said 'this is a young man with a lot of ideas.' And Sheldon loved it. He jumped at the chance to come to Topeka and especially to a new church, because this whole matter of having these expectations, these rules set in place -- he really chaffed at all of that. So the idea of having a new church where he would be able to do things his own way and not have a predecessor whose shoes he had to fill, was immensely appealing to him.

Narrator: Charles Sheldon moved to Kansas and assumed his new position in January of 1889. When he arrived, church services were being held in temporary quarters above a small grocery store. But within months, the congregation moved in to its new home on the west edge of the Kansas capital.

Tim Miller: Central Congregational Church founded in the late 1880s was placed deliberately on the western boundaries of Topeka, not only because that was seen as a growth area for the future, but because it was halfway between the downtown and the campus. There had been a college founded out on the west side of town, and so it was called Central Church actually, simply because it was halfway between.

Narrator: What's now known as Washburn University was called Washburn College when Charles Sheldon arrived in Topeka. Part of his ministry would involve developing a relationship with the students attending the college, and part of it with serving the needs of the larger community. But much of his energy was devoted to improving the lives of some people he found living right next to his church.

Tim Miller: Just across the street from Central Church there was a neighborhood that had been settled by former slaves and their children. They'd left Tennessee, in this case, after The Compromise of 1877 -- the end of Reconstruction -- with part of the great Exoduster movement moving west. And quite a few people from that movement ended up in Kansas. And the reason that this particular group settled in Topeka was that there was a land development scheme that had gone bust in west Topeka. There had been a real land boom. And then as real estate dealings tend to be, there are ups and downs in it, and this one had gone down. So there was this land on the edge of Topeka that was available very, very cheaply. And so that became the magnet that got them here. And as it happened, the place where the new church was set up -- Central Congregational Church -- was just right across the street from this neighborhood, which came to be known as Tennessee Town.

Don Miller (Former pastor, Central Congregational Church): And it was basically a slum and hadn't been ... this community hadn't done anything to keep it up and hadn't taken any civic responsibility for providing services. And so Sheldon kept pushing the church to do that.

Tim Miller: And these people were destitute. They came here penniless. Their lives were terrible. But he went in and really, really made himself familiar with the community. And then, recognizing what horrible poverty people lived in, set about trying to do something about it. Started a series of projects, and I think that put him on the map of public recognition before anything else. That was his first big project, trying to help these people who were in such desperate straits.

Kathy Timpany: And because schools were segregated and so forth, they started the first kindergarten here for black children west of the Mississippi. So he saw a need and said 'I think we can bring the resources of the church, the people of faith and their community to this need. And it is what Jesus would do. He would try to improve the lot of these families.'

Tim Miller: He believed that education was a logical way to help these poor people of Tennessee Town out of their squalor. I mean, what's the basic route out of poverty today? Education does pretty well. So teaching people basic skills, basic literacy, basic science, what have you -- that all became important to him. But he thought the place to start is with the little children. So he started a kindergarten.

Don Miller: Some of the teachers in the kindergarten were members of the church ... and some of the librarians. So that was also Sheldon's early efforts at integrating the church.

Kathy Timpany: And the things that followed with that, the school for mothers and the training of women in their households and schools, libraries, his interest in police unions, his interest in women's rights, and so forth. All of those were out of a direct sense of going out into the community, discovering a need that was not being met by the existing systems or, in fact, a need that was caused by the existing social systems, looking at that and saying 'I think we in the church can rally our forces and as an act of faith, and with the dedication that comes with our faith, make a change there.'

Tim Miller: Tennessee Town to this day is a passable neighborhood. It's not the poverty-stricken place it once was. It's not wealthy, but the fact that it hasn't become a really hardcore inner city, loser neighborhood, I think probably is still part of his legacy.

Narrator: Charles Sheldon sometimes referred to himself as a Christian sociologist. In order to gain a better understanding of the conditions in which people were working, he spent some of his spare time working at different jobs in the community. This gave him valuable insight into the lives of his parishioners, but also caused a bit of unease within the church.

Don Miller: And so when he'd go on vacation, he would disappear and suddenly the church members would find him working down in the railroad yards under an assumed name. And he'd be down there as a day laborer in the railroad yards trying to see what it really was like to be a day laborer and to experience the dejection and the rejection. He would do the same thing -- take on other kinds of jobs that were mostly menial kinds of jobs. And it was an embarrassment to the church, because the church was trying to see itself as this sophisticated congregation. This was the congregation where the governor had his membership and where the justices and the chief justice of the Supreme Court had their memberships. And this wasn't the place where the pastor put on jeans and a sweatshirt and went down and worked at Santa Fe shops.

Narrator: In addition to working on the railroad, Sheldon learned what the newspaper business was like by spending a few days as a volunteer reporter for the local paper. He later drew upon his experience as he developed one of the fictional characters featured in the work for which he became so well known.

Tim Miller: One of the most gripping scenes in the book *In His Steps* has to do with the Christian daily newspaper -- the editor who believes that he's not editing the paper as Jesus would do, and sets out to do it. And it's quite a story. It's a roller coaster story. Initially, once the paper becomes Christianized, people don't want to read it anymore. The paper practically goes broke, but a rich heiress steps in and decides 'this is what Jesus would want me to do with my money -- to keep a Christian newspaper going.' So she funds it and basically floats it until it can get on its feet on its own. And in the end, it's a great success. There's a fairly specific prescription in there of what you do and don't do. You don't do things that are un-Christian. You don't cover things that are un-Christian, like certain kinds of sporting events and things. You have a Christian perspective to news coverage. You don't just tell the story, but you often make a moral point.

Narrator: A few years after *In His Steps* was published, Sheldon struck a deal with one of the local newspapers, whose new, young publisher agreed to let him serve as the editor of the paper for a week.

Tim Miller: And it looked very much like the paper that he projected *In His Steps*. It wasn't really a newspaper; it was a paper of moral persuasion. A famine had been going on in India for some time, and so the lead story in issue number one has to do with the famine in India -- not only telling the story of it, but telling people how you can help -- how you can contribute to alleviating the problem. Sheldon was a lifelong pacifist, and the antiwar stories were a part of it -- the gruesome destruction of war got a lot of play in the paper. And so on and so forth. It simply was done as he thought. So it was quite an interesting week. The *Topeka Daily Capital*, for that week, you can still go look it up in the record, it's different than the paper otherwise was.

Narrator: The *circulation* for that week was also much different than normal. A special promotional campaign stimulated sales that exceeded 350,000 ... compared with

only ten to twelve thousand in normal times. To meet the demand, special editions of the Topeka Daily Capital were printed in Chicago, New York and London, extending Sheldon's fame, if not his fortune. Although professional journalists ridiculed his efforts, he demonstrated that there was a significant amount of interest in his approach ... a fact that was reinforced by the adaptation of his book to yet another type of media – magic lantern presentations.

Tim Miller: Well, when the book was a smashing success, naturally there was interest in promoting other versions of the story. This is really slightly before the days of movies. There actually were attempts to make movies later. But slightly before the days of movies, there were other ways of doing visual things. And one of them was lantern slides.

Phil Grecian: There were 150 slides in this set, and obviously there are more than 150 images available in any given novel. So the reader would read; it would come to the slide, which was coded at the bottom with a line from the novel; the glass slide operator would stick this in; it would go up there, and you might look at it for quite a while until the next one. But the people who attended these this was amazing. These were images from this book!

Narrator: Like his book, the magic lantern slides appealed more to the common citizen than to those in intellectual circles. Sheldon's fictional works as a whole were not seen to be very well developed by many of his critics.

Tim Miller: The critics of his work are many, and pretty scathing sometimes. They say this is real simple, mushy stuff. There's no serious content to it. It's sentimental. It's formulaic. And I would say that there's some truth to all of that. It's not highly sophisticated stuff. It's not philosophically advanced. It's not great literature. But I guess, in defense of Sheldon, I'd say that's not what it was intended to be. It was intended to be popular. It was intended to reach the masses. His very simple, sincere, heartfelt goal was he wanted to change people's behavior.

Kathy Timpany: Good, religious folk in those days didn't read fiction. It was kind of sinful and naughty, you know. You read devotional materials, or you read serious stuff. So what did he do but create a fictional venue, you know. 'I'll tell stories. I'll make up stories, and I'll make up serial stories like soap operas,' you know. He was a genius in that way – in grabbing the attention of people and keeping it going. And later on in this church's history, that same spirit of whimsy, if you will, played out when they began to show movies here in this sanctuary on Sunday nights. 'Movies!?!? Oh, good Christian folk don't go to the movies,' you know. But sure enough, let's use movies to gather a community of faith. And that, too, is a part of the legacy of Charles Sheldon that I think is fun.

Tim Miller: Sheldon wasn't a conservative. He's the darling of religious conservatives today, but he wasn't one of them. He was a liberal. He embraced new ideas, new thinking. He was pious. He was faithful. But to call him a conservative would, I think,

be doing him a disservice, you know. To pick one of the biggest issues of the day -- evolution and creation, Sheldon was an evolutionist. He thought the evidence was there, and it didn't weaken his faith to proclaim evolution as scientific fact. He lived through some pretty hard times, and yet he always had an idea that we could lift the human race beyond this.

Narrator: Through the Great Depression and two world wars, Charles Sheldon maintained faith in what he referred to as "the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth." He advocated peace and international cooperation, and remained confident in the universal, guiding presence of a higher power. As he encouraged people to live a more compassionate and selfless life, he also encouraged them to develop a different perspective on death. He saw no reason to make it such a sad affair.

Tim Miller: No, he wrote a number of pieces on why funerals should be joyous and happy. And indeed, when he died, they gave him a joyous funeral. But he thought it ought to be upbeat and not this heavy, heavy somber thing. I mean, sure, we're sad to lose the person, but hey, this person's going on to something far better, and that's what we should focus on.

Narrator: Charles Sheldon passed away in February of 1946 and was laid to rest on what would have been his 89th birthday. Perhaps the next time you hear or see a reference to "WWJD," you'll think about him and the stories he told to his congregation on those Sunday evenings before the days of radio and television ... or the subsequent book that popularized the question "What Would Jesus Do?" I'm Charles Atkins, Jr. Thanks for being with us.

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Post-Script:

Charles Sheldon was more concerned with social justice and ethical conduct than with theological debate, preferring to focus on what he referred to as an "untheological Christianity." Exploring what this might look like in today's world, we've spoken with a number of preachers, professors and authors who express some contemporary views about spirituality in the 21st century. Be watching for them in upcoming programs that venture "Beyond Theology" as this series continues.
