The kingdom of God, the church and George Davis Herron: his concepts and commitment, 1891-1899

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE CHURCH
AND GEORGE DAVIS HERRON:
HIS CONCEPTS AND COMMITMENT
1891-1899

by
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Thesis supervisor: Professor Stow Persons
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of Paula Hope Adix with a major in History has been approved by the Examining Committee as satisfactory for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree at the convocation of August, 1970.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter 1

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH AND ITS PRESENT PROBLEMS 12

American Protestantism: An Official Religion 18

Indictment of the Church's Present Problems 25

Chapter 2

HERRON'S PROPOSED SOLUTION FOR THE CHURCH'S PROBLEMS 39

Chapter 3

HERRON'S PERSONAL COMMITMENT 63

A BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERWORD 86

BIBLIOGRAPHY 88
... [At] a meeting of the Board of Trustees of Iowa College, a special meeting called for May 9, this whole matter was discussed in all its bearings, the note constituting the full endowment of a new professorship to be called the E. D. Rand Chair of Applied Christianity was before us within certain conditions, and I am glad to say that the note with every condition was heartily and with absolute unanimity, every member voting, accepted by the Board of Trustees. The note carried with it the call to Dr. Herron to accept the professorship and that vote, too, was with similar unanimity ... We have asked him there because we want him there to teach what we understand to be that for which Iowa College has always stood; that for which Iowa College has always taught, teaches today, and so God will, will always teach: the actual applicability of the principles of Jesus Christ to every department of human life ... We believe in Christianity and we believe Christ should be applied. We believe that the foundation of the new department in Iowa College is the opening of a wide door for the inculcation of the application of Christianity in every sphere of life.

President George A. Gates of Iowa College, Grinnell, was addressing the congregation of the First Congregational Church in Burlington, Iowa, when he spoke these words in May of 1893. He was faced with the rather delicate task of explaining to the members of the church why their popular and exciting young assistant pastor, George Davis Herron, had resigned his position after only seventeen months on the job. Herron had been a resounding success in the Burlington community. He had
accepted the call to serve Burlington from among the many offers he had received after gaining nationwide publicity in 1890 for a speech delivered before the Minnesota Congregational Club in Minneapolis. At the time he was a twenty-eight-year old pastor in an isolated and obscure little Minnesota town, but his address, "The Message of Jesus to Men of Wealth" made him an overnight celebrity in circles of socially-conscious Christians. While he had been in Burlington Herron was active in bringing the doctrines of social Christianity into the minds and hearts and daily lives of his parishioners. During the winter of 1893 he had delivered a lecture series in the church dealing with the themes of labor, capital, wealth, and poverty which had been resoundingly backed by union labor and just as resoundingly criticized by business leaders. He had published several volumes of his sermons, and his national reputation was growing. In January of 1892 he had been invited to speak at a prayer day at Iowa College, and at the College the following summer had organized and led a retreat for ministers centering around the themes of the social gospel. In sum, he was an active, energetic, and popular young man-on-the-way-up. And in the spring of 1893 he was about to make a very important move.

By 1890 the idea of a social gospel had taken root in the minds and hearts of many clergymen across the country. The social gospel was a response on the part of socially-aware
ministers to the problems they believed were destroying the quality of human life and society in the United States. They were sharing the responses which sparked the whole movement for reform in the late nineteenth century. They observed the misuse of wealth that had been accumulated through unjust business practices, the dangers of monopolistic capitalism, the strife between labor and capital, the intense poverty of the cities, the inhuman evil of tenements, the corruption of politics at every level. The socially-concerned ministers responded to these problems and conditions by stressing the ethical aspects of the Christian religion, by placing a strong emphasis on the moral teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Salvation came to be regarded as an ethical-social process. Hopkins lists six major characteristics which marked the social gospel movement at the beginning of the 1890's: 1) criticism of the other-worldly outlook and individualism of orthodox Christianity, 2) a new emphasis on humanitarian and social aspects, 3) Christian ethics were considered to constitute the norm for social standards, 4) salvation was conceived in social-ethical terms, 5) the kingdom of God on earth was the inclusive religious ideal, a perfected human society, 6) the church and its ministers were summoned to lead the new social crusade. The church was responsible for the ethics of society and thus was obligated to assume leadership of the social movement.

Many church leaders felt urgently pressed to familiarize themselves with the causes and methods of the reform movement,
and learn how the church could best actualize the ethical teachings of Christ in an already corrupted society. Societies were formed, books were written, pamphlets and magazines were published by the score, and many ministers' institutes were held throughout the country similar to the one conducted by Herron at Iowa College in 1892. The fundamental motivation behind all these books, articles, societies, and retreats: to apply Christianity to life in society.

Several years before Herron came to Burlington, a wealthy Burlington widow was serving on the Board of Trustees of Iowa College, a position which had previously been held by her late husband, a railroad and construction magnate. Mrs. E. D. Rand had on several occasions mentioned to President Gates that she wished to eventually endow a professorship at Iowa College in memory of her late husband. It was only after Herron's return to the College in January, 1893, to address a second prayer day convocation, that Gates sounded the young pastor out on the possibility of his joining the Iowa College faculty. The arrangements with Mrs. Rand concerning the endowment were completed, and on 9 May 1893 the Board of Trustees approved the endowment and extended a call to Herron to hold the E. D. Rand Chair of Applied Christianity.

What sort of man was George D. Herron? A personal testimony in Herron's own words delivered before the examining board of the Burlington church in 1901 provides many insights into Herron as a
man and as a crusader. As a pastoral candidate he was required
to deliver a confession of faith before a board of members of the
church he desired to serve. Herron announced at the outset to
the examining board that he felt such an occasion should be one of
total self-revelation, where "apostolic frankness" should prevail,
where

we should not fear to reveal to each other our real
and inmost selves, and lift the curtain of our holiest
experiences; so that we should not hesitate to speak
freely of our most persistent doubts, our saddest fail­
ures, our most perplexing difficulties . . .

Thus, Herron declared, he was "willing to . . . be thought egoistic" in making a soul-bearing confession of his faith and the spiritual experiences which inspired his preaching.

Herron believed he had been converted before he was born.

His father's family heritage was solidly Christian, extending back
to the Scottish Reformation. But more important than mere hered­
ity was the almost mystical spiritual state of his mother during
the time of her confinement before Herron's birth.

During the year preceding my birth my mother lived in an
atmosphere of prayer, studying good books and brooding
over her Bible. She asked God to give her a child who
should be his servant. She received me as from God and
gave me back to God as her free-will offering . . .
she never again, nor had she before, reached the spirit­
ual height upon which she walked with God during the
year of my birth. But nothing has ever been able to
separate her from the belief that in bringing me into
the world she had fulfilled the purpose of her being,
and she never doubted that I would be a messenger of
God to my fellowmen.

His mother was an invalid throughout Herron's childhood, and until
he was ten years of age "it was nearly always a question whether I
should live from one year to another." The boy sought out companionship with his father, who taught him to read and directed his thoughts Godward. He confessed to have known "little of childhood or play" but read Bancroft's history of the world before he was ten years old. He consequently believed that as a child he developed "something like a philosophy of history":

The reign of God in human affairs was so wrought into all my thoughts that I could not form a conception from any other point of view." 

God was his confidant, he said, and Joseph, Elijah, and Daniel, Cromwell and John Wesley and Charles Sumner were his imaginary playmates.

Thus, I grew up in the company of God, with a daily deepening sense of a divine call which sooner or later I must obey.

At the age of thirteen Herron went to work as a printers' apprentice. Life in the working world, he found, was filled with temptations and "vicious associations" which threatened his pure beliefs. "I sometimes looked upon sin lightly," he confessed, "I did much that was wrong. Yet I did not fall into the vile sins of my companions." At times during the seven difficult years of his apprenticeship, when everything seemed lost and wasted,

the glory of the Lord would cleft the darkness and envelop me, filling my soul with a joy I could not understand and giving unto me a quenchless faith.

Herron attended Ripon College for three years. Before he assumed the duties of his first parish in Lake City, Minnesota, he was
married to Mary Everhard. They would have four children.

Herron believed his Christian faith was the product of his own deep personal experience. Shortly after he began his ministry he underwent a profound conversion experience, so terrible, he declared, that Jonathan Edwards' Enfield sermon, "Sinners in the hand of an angry God" was the "only thing real enough to answer to my experience."13 From this travail in the "horrible pit"14 Herron emerged with an invincible faith in Christ, the friend of sinners, through whom he found peace with God. Through what God had revealed himself to be in Christ, Herron had hope and faith in the future of the race. He felt himself absolutely compelled to preach the gospel. God

has given unto me, experience by experience, new and larger revelations of his truth and has shown me what he has for me to do . . . To show men the sufficiency of Christ in their personal lives, in the reconstruction of society, in the problems of history, is my supreme privilege, my consuming passion.15

Herron's theological beliefs and his social convictions were both thoroughly Christocentric. He consistently affirmed Christ as the ground of his belief. When asked to give in a word the central idea of his teaching Herron replied: "This--to interpret life according to Jesus Christ."16 In his confession of faith Herron stated:

The best statement of belief I can make is a simple confession of my faith in Christ as God in man and man in God. I believe that by his obedient life and sacrificial death he has wrought a complete redemption for the world, and satisfied God with humanity and reconciled man to God.17
The entire record of Scripture pointed towards the coming of the kingdom of God. Herron believed the kingdom was to be realized in a perfected human social order on earth.

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible looks to a divinely organized human society, and regards the world as the subject of redemption. The kingdom was an attainable ideal because the redeeming power of Christ was applicable to all human institutions and practices, to the whole fabric of society, and not just to individual salvation.

The grace of Christ is as sufficient for the affairs of state, the construction of society, the reformation of politics, the management of traffic in labor or wares, as it is for the saving of my soul.

It was the unbelief of so-called Christians and the practical atheism of society that limited the power of Christ's redemption "to the sentiments and inner experiences of the individual." And, it was the obligation of the church to "work out this great salvation in a heavenly civilization that shall be as in harmony with the spirit of God as the obedience of Jesus Christ."

It was with the hope of bringing the church as a united and living institution to a realization of its role in applying the Christian gospel to all aspects of life so that the kingdom might come that Herron resigned the pastorate at Burlington to go to Iowa College. "I believe," he wrote in his letter of resignation, we are entering upon a supreme and momentous day in Christian history. I believe that unless the church grasps a new conception of Christianity, unless it comprehends that Christianity is a life to be lived as well as a doctrine to be professed, both the church
and the nation can be saved only by fire. The church is lost and false if it continue as it now is.22

But God was now at work in the most unlikely ways and places, preparing the imminent coming of the kingdom.

The living Christ, who is among us in the problems of our day, calling the church to repentance, will prove himself the strong Redeemer of the church, our nation, our society. The kingdom of heaven is at hand in America.23

This is a study of Herron's concept of the church—its history, its present problems, and what the church needed to do to resolve its current conflicts in order to apply Christianity to life—and the nature of Herron's personal commitment to the church. It is concerned with those years during the 1890's when he was preaching in Burlington and on the faculty of Iowa College, Grinnell.

In the summer of 1893, Herron, his wife, and their children, moved from Burlington to Grinnell. Shortly thereafter, two other people from Burlington also moved to Grinnell, and soon were living right next door to the Herrons: Herron's wealthy benefactress, Mrs. E. D. Rand, and her daughter, Carrie.
INTRODUCTION

1 "President Gates' Address," p. 1, MS, Vol. I, The Herron Papers. Grinnell College Library, Grinnell Room Collection. I wish here to express my thanks and appreciation to Mary E. Klausner, Archives Librarian, Grinnell College Library, for providing me with constant and helpful access to the Herron material.


3 Hopkins, p. 105.


6 "Confession," p. 3.

7 "Confession," p. 3.

8 "Confession," p. 4.


10 "Confession," p. 4.


12 "Confession," p. 5.


22 Gates' Address, p. 3.
23 Gates' Address, p. 3.
Chapter 1

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH AND ITS PRESENT PROBLEMS

History, according to George Davis Herron, revealed the evolutionary progress of man's spiritual development, as well as the physical metamorphosis of human life on earth. The ultimate product of man's evolving spiritual life would be the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. This would be accomplished when God's will was indeed done on earth as it was in heaven. Salvation was thus not only the hope of individuals: it was an inexorable social mandate as well. With social salvation established as the goal of the life of the human race, true religion could not consist in a withdrawal from life in the world. The separation of institutionalized religion from the forces and passions of life in the world was atheism:

... atheism is the absence of God, or the denial of righteousness in human relations—it has nothing to do with religious opinion.¹

Cloistered asceticism, which abjured the "corruption" of the world, was, according to Herron, not a true religion: for religion as revealed by Jesus Christ, was "pure and simple life: life with God ... life rich with the fulness of human fellowships."² The church had been divinely commissioned by God to implement religion as life in human society.
Herron saw the church as an institution in human society, its character and qualities to a great extent reflecting the character and qualities of the society of which it was a part. The church was very much a human organization and a product of human history, but for Herron the history of man was

the drama of [man's] futile reaching after God, through temples of stone, through institutions of religion and law, without the obedience and sacrifice of the life unto God. 3

Institutionalized religion was never the will of God, but rather man's perverse attempt to commune with God. 4 At its very best a religious institution could be the medium through which God poured Christ on society, but more often than not institutionalized religion obstructed the will of God because it set itself up as the end and objective of religion. 5

When the organized church came to regard itself as the objective of religion, it sought to preserve and aggrandize its institutional power in the society, thereby denying its divine instruction to interpret all aspects of life and work in light of the coming of the kingdom of God. 6 This drive towards institutional preservation and enlargement would involve the church's participation in, and implicit sanction of, the sins of society. Herron believed history witnessed to the validity of his contentions.

The Jewish church during the time of Christ's ministry had come to exist for its own institutional self. It illustrated the perils to be found when a church lost sight of the principles and
meanings behind its symbols. The Jews blindly conserved the forms and rituals of the past for the sake of observance alone, without allowing the spirit and power behind their ceremonies and symbols to touch them. The temple, for example, had been built to symbolize the fellowship of God with man, but instead of permitting the vitalizing force of fellowship to extend into their daily lives as men among men, the Jews, after centuries of ritualistic observance, had come to revere the temple for itself, and not the relationship it represented. The institution had come to be mistaken for the communion.7

The Jews' essential apostasy, against which the prophets cried out for generations lay in regarding the institution as an end in itself; in mistaking the organization of religion for life with God; in conserving the inspiration of the past in unchanging ceremonials, and rejecting the inspiration of the present, which is the moral health of the people.8

Because they were held in blind bondage to the God of their past, the Jews were unable to recognize the God in their present. They were not able to see that Christ was the long-awaited Messiah. Because they sought to draw the people unto themselves and not to God, the religious leaders of the Jewish church saw Christ as a usurper and a destroyer of their established order, and had him killed. "Religious institutionalism . . . crucified life."9

Herron saw a peculiar instinct in religious institutions and their leaders, an instinct of which they were most likely not aware.
The knowledge of the true nature of God could not help but inspire and uplift the people—by apprehending the fatherhood of God, by seeing him as a loving, benevolent father, men would realize their common brotherhood, and would work to realize that brotherhood in human society. This would involve the overthrow of all kinds of institutionalized privilege, social, political and religious. Institutional religion and its clergy thus instinctively sought to keep the people ignorant of the freedom implicit in a true preaching of Christ's gospel, because it would jeopardize their privileged priestly position.

Religion, as taught by Jesus, was the brotherhood of man in the fatherhood of God, realized by sacrifice, which was the denial of selfish individualism in living for the life of the whole human community. This is what Jesus brought to the people of his day and to all mankind. He did not believe in religious institutions.

Jesus believed in God, and he believed in the people; he believed in the soldiers and even in the politicians; but he did not believe in religious institutions and their teachers, because they were seeking to draw all men unto themselves instead of unto God his father and the Father of the people.

Christ called men to repentance not because a church was at hand which they might enter as an ark or refuge, but because the kingdom of God, a divinely just social order, was drawing near to claim the citizenship and sacrifice of men in its fulfillment.

The faith he gave his disciples is recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, which Herron could reduce to a single beatitude: men might be children of God by being more like him.
The early Christian church, Herron declared, was the ideal to which the modern church must return. It had been a true covenant of believers: not a stifling religious institution. The apostles, Herron said, "attacked the world as men who were victors from the outset."¹⁴ Their source of power was a supreme faith in an immanent Christ. They overcame the world by their faith and their acceptance of the absolute authority of Christ over all human life. For the early Christians, Christianity meant society, "a divine order of human relations in the world."¹⁵ The early Christian church was not an institution which existed for its own sake: its strength lay in its belief in the real presence of Christ in every human situation, and it made great gains because it was sacrificial.¹⁶ These apostolic congregations were fellowships and inspirations, not institutions and organizations.¹⁷

The early church was not to remain in its pristine state for long, however. According to Herron, two major influences were to corrupt and vitiate it: Greek philosophy and Roman law. Through the grafting on of Greek philosophy, the teachings of Christ were changed almost beyond recognition from a social ideal to a theological system. The apostolic message of righteousness became a theology which emphasized the correctness of opinions about God, rather than the transformation of human character through Christ's message of brotherhood, sacrifice, and social salvation.¹⁸ The church lost its social sense of obligation and dissolved itself into
factions as it debated arid points of theology, like the procession of the Trinity.  

The influence of Roman law was responsible for instituting a hierarchical government within the church. This imposed despotism was not the only Roman corruption. Roman legalism could also be detected in a newly added theological dimension of the true role and nature of Christ.

Christ the Redeemer and elder brother of men became a successful pleader at the bar of an Infinite Judge, in a court of abstract and unreal justice; a judge who had nothing to do with the reality of love. Instead of being received as a revelation of God, Christ has since been presented to man as a protection from God.

The church was to become more and more corrupt and self-possessed for over a thousand years, until it reached the breaking point at the time of the Reformation. Then the inspired voices of the current day were heeded, and new church organizations were established by the Protestants. A greater emphasis was also placed on faith in Jesus as saviour, however much of the theological superstructure was retained intact or only slightly modified. Herron saw two potentially dangerous elements which emerged from the tumult of the Reformation. First, too much emphasis was placed on Luther's faith alone dictum— the need to work for salvation in society, which was an equally vital part of Christ's teaching, was suppressed as the Protestants reacted against the corrupt practices the Catholic church had used to lure individuals into insuring their
salvation in the hereafter. Secondly, the Reformation schism left
the universal church hopelessly divided, and although at the time
separation was a needful thing, it was a great blow to the uni-
versal proclamation of Christ. These "discordant sects" must be
reunited in a "true and holy universal church."22

In surveying the history of the Christian church, Herron be-
lieved it had become an official religion, one in which the peo-
ple were

willing to worship; to believe the doctrines commonly
accepted by organized religion; to support a clergy
and be benevolent; to be devoutly pious, so far as
anything may be required of [them] by the church; to
conduct [their lives] according to profitable moral
codes current; to be full of the integrity that ac-
crues from the precious fictions of economic laws.23

"The history of official religion," he concluded, "is largely the
record of organized substitutes for righteousness."24

Historically, the church's failure to believe in the principle
of sacrifice accounted for all its calamities. Herron argued that
"any pure view of the historic retrospect" would show the advance
of man has not been accomplished by those who have lived by the
forces of organization and suppression, but rather by "the men who
have laid down their own lives through an unresisting faith in the
triumph of right through moral "processes," i.e., sacrifice.25

American Protestantism: An Official Religion

Official religion tended to be a prisoner of its worship of
past revelations. The greatest danger of over-revering the past
was the way it blinded the church to the inspiration of the present. God had spoken as clearly to the church in every phase of its history as he had spoken to the Jewish church. As Herron viewed it, American Protestantism in the 1890's was part and parcel of this historical tradition of official religion. He charged the church with infidelity to Jesus, and his indictment rested on three counts: 1) it had abandoned Christ's gospel which was its undergirding principle; 2) it had come to blindly conserve its own past; 3) and it was mistaking its institutional structure as the end, and not the means, of religion.

1) The modern church had come to abuse, if not altogether to abandon, the teachings of Christ. Herron's principle indictment of the church: it had abandoned the gospel as the law of life. The gospel was a masterplan for organizing all aspects of human life on earth, not a handbook by which the individual could gain admission to an eternal life in the hereafter. The life of Christ had vindicated sacrifice as the fundamental principle of all life. Herron defined sacrifice as the dying to oneself in serving for others. Christ was God in the human race suffering the consequences of sin—he was perfect innocence sacrificed for guilt. Christ's character proved that the world was grounded in right; his sacrifice upon the cross revealed that sacrifice and not self-interest is universal law; that selfishness does not belong to the nature of things, but is the anarchy of life and the negation of society.
Herron asserted that sacrifice was the deepest natural instinct of man, and that human society was the operation of sacrifice in human relations. Sacrifice, the dying to oneself in saving others, made for true human solidarity between man and man, and solidarity was another word to describe the brotherhood of man under the common fatherhood of God.

But the church had abandoned these gospel principles. It now sought actively to avoid Christ's yoke of self-abandonment, and was living by the principle of self-interest.\textsuperscript{31}

\ldots this scheming to get all Christ has to give, without gratefully giving unto him all our beings and doings and havings, is the religious selfishness which is the heart-disease of the church of our day.\textsuperscript{32}

Herron accused the church of outright rejection of Christ's sacrifice, and of denying the call to sacrifice which was imperative within the church's own divine mission. It had fallen victim to the very temptation Christ himself had resisted in the wilderness: it was trying to redeem the world with its earthly kingdoms and worldly glory, when, in reality, the church could still save the world through no other way than sacrificing itself, as Christ had done, for the redemption of the world.\textsuperscript{33}

Herron continually reiterated the applicability of the gospel to all aspects of life: socially, politically, economically, it was not only relevant, but practicable. Want of belief in this assumption was a denial of Christ's pure righteousness, and
constituted "a betrayal of Christ and an apostasy [in] the church." 34

The church had lost sight of the basic teaching of Christ that "life consists not in the things one hath, but in the life one gives." 35 Under the pretense of fulfilling its mission of bringing Christ to the world, the church was in reality working to expand and prosper its own material holdings and its position of social respectability. It was not giving of its own life. The church worshipped the mammon of gain, and was forsaking the cross of Jesus Christ. 36

2) The church further revealed its infidelity to Jesus through its time-honored reverence of the past and its resulting blindness to the living revelations of the present. The church was perpetually beset by the temptation to conclude that "all religious truth has been discovered." 37

Then follows the dissociation of truth from life; and we the church constitute ourselves the truth's constablers . . . 38

Herron urged and exhorted the church to view Christ as a living reality in the present day. He placed great significance on the resurrection of Christ from the dead. When Christ had lived and taught his disciples, he had been a local phenomenon, limited to a specific place and time. But when he arose from the grave he became "the infinite spirit-Christ [who] was alive forever . . ." 39 not limited in time and space, but universally immanent and eternal. Christ was thus perpetually alive and was revealing himself to
every successive contemporary situation.

But the church of Herron's day was virtually denying the reality of the resurrection by "[beholding] Christ only in the past." 40 Men continued to profess him as their Saviour and to believe in his divinity, but only on the basis of stale historical facts. They were not perceiving the ongoing truth and power and authority of Christ that was being revealed in the daily life of the world around them. The church had "retombed [Christ] in a creed, in a sect, in a school of theology, in a luxurious church, in a conceited civilization." 41 It regarded the social salvation taught by Christ and the apostles as impracticable in modern human society, and rejected as a mystic dream the unselfishness of sacrifice revealed in the gospel.

Herron strongly indicted the church for its abhorence of living inspiration, which he believed was a sign of the degradation of the faith. "[An] original inspiration from God for one's own time and its problems" had come to be regarded as a form of heresy. 42 The record of Scripture contained the history of God's dealings in the past, and his messages were indeed relevant for all times and for all people, and Herron did not seek to demean their value. He saw the church, however, trying "to make the messages of God to a dead people take the place of the messages of God to a living people." 43 This was a particularly heinous crime for it actually separated the people from God instead of uniting them together in brotherhood under his common fatherhood.
However devout and religious we may be, though so ever
correct in opinion and faultless in conduct, if we are
simply finding lessons in what God said to a people now
dead, and are not in such relations with God that he
can express his thought and will through us the living,
we are practically without faith, and pretend to a
spiritual authority we do not possess.\textsuperscript{44}

This refusal of the church to be inspired by the God of the
present, coupled with its blind worship of past revelations, had
only spelled trouble for the church throughout its history. It
made the Jewish church blind to the living presence of Christ, and
was responsible for the consequent persecution of his followers.
It made the Catholic church blind to the revelation found in the
Reformation, and accounted for the massive persecutions which fol­
lowed it. Herron conjectured that the Protestant church would re­
peat its own history, that it would

in its turn . . . persecute those who behold the
\textsuperscript{[present]} social revelation of God in Christ.\textsuperscript{45}

3) The ultimate fruition of Christ's teachings would be the
realization of the kingdom of God in the temporal, here-and-now
world. The entire fabric of human society would then be imbued
with the reality of sacrifice as its operating principle, and men
would be united not only spiritually, but economically, socially,
and politically in an undying universal brotherhood. Because
Protestant Christianity in late nineteenth-century America had
assumed the powerful status of an official religion, it had a
vested interest in maintaining the societal status quo which sup­
ported its present institutional existence. Such concern with
institutional self-preservation constituted an infidelity to the
teachings of Jesus.

The institutional church has come upon a certain seeking to save and build itself up first, resulting in a seeking of the righteousness of the Kingdom of God subordinately . . . 46

The institutional church had substituted temporal achievements for the attaining of its divine mission: it measured its success in terms of its own institutional aggrandizement in the world.

We point to our costly and beautiful temples of worship, to the crosses crowning the village hilltops, and the crosses the church spires lift above the city's smoke and strife. We count our great missionary benefactions, and hold mammoth religious conventions. We are perfecting and unifying our great ecclesiastical organizations, and forming new societies, and appointing countless committees. We have revised creeds, and progressive theologies, and renowned preachers. 47

By these standards the church was measuring its success, and its official classes had mistaken "the numerical and financial increase of the church for an increase of Christianity and the Kingdom of God." 48

The church actually was manifesting complacency and the "religious arrogance of institutional selfishness." 49 The church had come to view itself as the end of religion, and not as the means of spreading and realizing the teachings of Christ in society. Concern for its own interests was forcing the church to teach religiousness, and not the righteousness it was commissioned to propagate.

The true message of Jesus, with its emphasis on self-abnegation, sacrifice, and love, could not be reconciled with a material dominion
like the institutional church had amassed. Herron saw the organized church as being dependent for its very survival on the corrupt economy which was responsible for the anguish and suffering of the urban and rural poor. In the interest of its own self-preservation, the church was not about to bite the hand that fed it. Thus it was not being true to its calling: it was peddling religion instead of implementing the dynamic message of sacrifice and human equality in brotherhood that was the essence of Christ's righteousness.50

Indictment of the Church's Present Problems

The church could ultimately be considered a failure, Herron declared. Although outwardly prosperous, it was inwardly corrupt because it had forsaken its true mission—to propagate the kingdom of God. It had gained in membership and status until it had come to constitute an official religion, but its faith in its vital objective was dessicated. The church had co-opted for the world, and was no longer seized with the reality of the coming of the kingdom of God.

Herron sought to bring this co-optation to light. One fundamental obstacle thrust in the way of the kingdom was the church's advocacy and maintenance of a sacred-secular distinction. According to this concept, certain aspects of life were considered to bring one closer to God than others: one sought salvation through
the church, but the other activities of life were basically outside the province of religious influence. The church was believed to constitute a haven of sanctity where the righteous and redeemed could isolate and protect themselves from the evil and corruption of the world at large.

Herron declared Jesus' teachings were not to be applied to only one single aspect of human life (i.e., spirituality) but rather were relevant and applicable to every phase and activity of life. God, man, and nature, were part of one essential unity based on sacrifice and fellowship. To be a Christian was not to withdraw from the tumult and sin of life in the world, but rather to live in the world as one imbued with the sacrificial ideal of Christ, and work to possess the world, to permeate every human involvement with sacrifice and brotherhood. In the past the church had served as an ark of safety from the world, preaching the corruptability of the world's values, and exhorting the pious and believing to forsake the world and remain pure and undefiled by living in the church, and not in the world. Herron denounced this appropriation of false sanctity for religious institutions, and held it to be diametrically opposed to the church's true calling to "permeate and possess all the world, the world's people and institutions and machinery, with the holiness of Christ."51

With the church setting itself up as the end, and not the means of religion, it was perpetrating a false ideal of man's
relationship with the world he lived in. With the church seen as
the goal of religion a special (though utterly false) sanctity
hovered around it which separated the church from the world.
Herron viewed it as hedging

the institutions of the church about with a fictitious
sacredness, and the officials of religion with an un­
real holiness, separating the work and people of the
world into one class, and the church and officials of
religion into another.52

Such false reverence in reality only degraded the offices of the
church and "made them a blasphemy of the life of God in the peo-

The church was no more inherently holy than any other
natural human function or organization. When a mantle of special
sanctity was cast about it, the church constituted a denial of the
supreme sanctity of human life. It was then a "barrier between
God and the people" and religion became "a living lie to the people
about God."54

Every conception that the ministry and offices of
religion have an inherent sacredness attaching not to
other work of the world is a profanation of human life
and an apostasy of religion. To the measure that the
church appears before the people demanding a regard
for itself that it conceives does not belong to every
occupation and organization of man, it appears under
false pretences, and becomes a minister of practical
atheism, responsible for political iniquity, and com-
mercial fraud; for . . . social unrighteousness . . .
and the tyrannies and wrongs of our industrial order.55

At present the church appeared to be growing in influence
without having to follow the sacrificial ways of Christ. But
such "growth" was ultimately false: the church could not realize
the kingdom of God on earth unless it were rejected by the proud; unless it knew the sorrows and grief of the oppressed; and unless it sacrificed itself unto death in showing forth the love of God for mankind.56

The church, Herron charged, was not conquering the world, but rather, was being conquered by the world.57 In taking a realistic look at the church's present values, Herron charged that the church was worshipping the "victorious forces of time . . . prudence, thrift, respectability, reputation, culture", in short, all the "virtues" which made for material success in the world.58 By what standards did the church judge itself? By the sizes of membership lists, by the number of newly-constructed church buildings, by committees, organizations, societies, and conventions, Sunday school attendance rolls: that is, by the material standards of success.

To whom was the church appealing? Modern Christianity was an aristocratic and shameless pauperism which attracted those who were thriving on the wealth of sacrifice inherited from the past; resting in high-priced pews and fashionable residences; cunningly squeezing a luxurious living out of humanity, and superciliously labelling as charity the appeals made to serve the humanity that supports it.59

Sadly, but surely, the church was separating itself from those it was meant to serve, while sanctioning in its supporters the covetousness that fattens on the flesh of toiling boys and girls; the greed that wrecks the hopes and fortunes of less cunning rivals; the fashion whose fatuous arrogance fans the flame of judgment that is kindling in the skies; the luxury that is content to enjoy, while men with dark thoughts beg for work, and
hopeless women slave in sweaters' dens, and the life withers out of starved babes . . .

As he surveyed the contemporary church, Herron saw a new development emerging. The church was failing to realize how Jesus' teachings were applicable to the total fabric of human institutions. At present it was vigorously supporting the secular status quo and encouraging its members in their secular pursuits, all without seeming to notice how the current state of its affairs was antithetical to its divine calling. Drawing a distinction between sacred and secular was based on the concept of individual salvation, and denied the salvation of institutions and of society. As a result the church had come to sanction the pursuit of individualism and individualistic objectives, and had forsaken what Herron believed to be the heart of the message of Jesus: social salvation.

The church was thinking only in terms of the individual and was supporting the right of the individual to do as he pleased in society. In late nineteenth-century America, Herron maintained, the mad pursuit of individualism had gone for so long unchecked that the continued existence of society itself was threatened. An erroneous reading of Darwin's evolutionary theory had been used to justify all forms of competition among individuals. Competition was loudly heralded as the order of the day for every walk of life because it supposedly insured the survival of the fittest.

Herron vehemently disavowed competition as the natural order of society. Using the ideal model society revealed by Jesus, Herron
denied that competition was the social, economic and political law. Competition only undermined and emasculated the social qualities which were requisite for the establishment of the kingdom of God. "Competition" was only a euphemism for the untrammeled pursuit of self-interest, and, far from being the principle on which a social order functioned, self-interest could yield only anarchy. Competition brought separation among men by erecting material barriers between them, and for Herron, social separation was anathema.

Social separation, the isolation of the privileged from the unprivileged classes, the withdrawal of life from fellowship with life for material and selfish reasons, is moral anarchy and outrage; it is the most godless and wicked of all infidelity, asserting that human life consists in the abundance of things which it hath, that the immortal life which God has breathed into man is cheaper than the fashion of his clothes, or worthy of less consideration than the etiquette of his manners.

Competition among individuals was founded on selfishness, and "selfishness as the law of society is hell on earth." It made brotherhood and sacrifice impossible to realize in practice, and consequently made the kingdom an impossible attainment.

The church was directly involved in the social, political, and industrial unrighteousness of the present day because it sanctioned competition. It welcomed with open arms and courted the benevolence of the captains of industry and the corrupt politicians who had emerged at the top of the competitive heap. At the same time it ignored those who, in Herron's view, had provided the barons of corruption with their triumphs: the poor. The present social system, though churchly, was certainly not Christian, but
"respectable paganism galvanized with Christianity." Herron believed the church had no intention of practicing the gospel, but rather had

practically abandoned the gospel as the law of life, putting opinion and money in its place, rearing the throne of mammon in the place of the changeless cross of the slain Christ... Unconsecrated men, who lie and rob and destroy, who outrage all humanities and gorge themselves with blood-red gold... pass for men of integrity and conspicuous Christian philanthropy.

In sum, Herron charged the church was in institutional failure as the representative of Christ, and as the bearer of the gospel of the coming kingdom. Its infidelity to Jesus, he maintained, was shown by: 1) the church's denial of the principle and power of sacrifice; 2) the church's reverence of past revelations and consequent blindness to the inspiration of the present; 3) the church's false assumption that its institutional organization would constitute the kingdom of God on earth. Herron also indicted the church for failing to fulfill its responsibility of ushering in the kingdom, and his indictment had three basic counts.

1) The church persisted in maintaining a false distinction between "sacred" and "secular" aspects of life. Herron saw the perpetuation of this dichotomy revealed the church's fundamental disbelief in the practicability of the law of love in political and economic matters. Instead, the church was
guilty of a vast profanation of God in dividing human life into the secular and the religious. Secularism is atheism reduced to practice. The theory that the whole actual life of the world must be lived out under the dominion of selfishness is the science of treason to the kingdom of God.  

2) The church was outwardly prosperous, but inwardly corrupt because it had forsaken its true mission in favor of prosperously accommodating itself to the world. It had gained in membership, in financial and property assets, in status, and in social acceptability, but it was not fulfilling its divine calling by ignoring the social urgencies of its day. Because it had arrived at a comfortable détente with the world, the church was strongly resisting changes in the status quo—it was a conservatively entrenched institution that would not jeopardize its own prosperity. It was thus ignoring and rejecting the perpetual social dynamic of the teachings of Jesus that society was to be ever evolving and progressing towards the brotherhood and fellowship of the kingdom. The church was being conquered by the world and was acquiring the reactionary conservatism of "establishment."

The church itself would regard the attempt to realize the prophetic and apostolic vision of a new earth as not only hopeless lunacy, but a dangerous and disreputable movement towards the disruption of society.  

3) The church held an erroneous view of the redeemed world. It would convert individuals first, with the hope that the world would be saved one-by-one. This was totally contrary to the words of Jesus. Herron was fond of quoting Cardinal Newman:
'If there be a distinction of the gospel plainly laid down in Scripture, it is that it is a social religion, and addresses individuals as parts of a whole.'

Herron asserted that even chronologically, Jesus in his ministry had first preached the news of the kingdom, "a new order of life . . . which placed [men] in a wholly new attitude toward God and the world", and then, secondarily, revealed the "religion of the individual to the new spirit and regenerated order." Jesus, Herron maintained, clearly defined his ideal society.

He left no room for mistake concerning the work of this Christian society. There is nothing ambiguous about his definition of the quality of life that entitled men to citizenship in the kingdom of God. His society was to be a fellowship of those who should bear his cross of suffering for the sin of the world; a society of men and women as distinctly dedicated to sacrifice as the slain Lamb himself.

The whole of society was to be the organization of Jesus' redemption of the world, and not clustered aggregations of redeemed individuals.

America in the nineteenth century had witnessed a wide diffusion of Christianity at the expense of its quality. The church, Herron concluded, lacked vital faith in the practicability of Christ's righteousness in society. Its "unfaith" was "cultivated in the interests of theology, ecclesiasticism, and the social worship of property", and though not deliberate but unconscious, was still a "betrayal of Christ and an apostasy of the church."
The church was an institutional failure as the representative of Christ and the bearer of the gospel of the coming kingdom. It constituted a denial of the righteousness of Christ, and such a denial held grave political consequences.

However politically fallen we be as a people, I know of nothing in our politics more perilous to the nation, no social ailment more serious, than this practical unfaith of the church in the righteousness of Christ.

Although it was not purposefully cultivated, this practical unfaith was still unconsciously nurtured, and had serious consequences as far as individuals were concerned.

God's people don't know the difference between religious observances and faith... they will not consider political right in the distinction from political wrong... they persist in the sin of ignorance concerning the social condition of the nation... they refuse to be morally intelligent and reasonable.

Herron saw the "repentance of the church and its conversion to a larger faith in Christ" as a "political reform of immediate need." The church needed to repent and to be renewed in a faith in Christ of far greater and more dynamic dimensions. It needed to behold the relevance of Christ to every aspect of human life, and then to seek to actuate its increased faith in the society of which it was a part. If it were ever to see the coming of the kingdom, however, the church would have to be born again.
Chapter 1


4*Society*, p. 55.

5*Society*, pp. 55-56.

6*Society*, p. 80.

7*Society*, p. 57.

8*Society*, p. 57.

9*Society*, p. 57.

10*Society*, p. 60.

11*Society*, p. 59.

12*Society*, p. 65

13Plea, pp. 16-18.

14Plea, p. 94.

15*Society*, p. 65.


17*Society*, p. 28.

18Plea, p. 18.

19The doctrine of the Trinity was grafted on to Christ's gospel of righteousness by the Greek philosophers, an offense for which Herron was never able to forgive them.
Plea, p. 19.

State, p. 21.

Meanings, p. 61.

Meanings, p. 61.

State, p. 27.

State, p. 165.


George Davis Herron, The Larger Christ (Chicago, 1891), p. 81.

Christ, p. 52.

Society, p. 37.

Christ, p. 82.

Christ, pp. 82-83.

Christ, p. 66.

State, p. 152.


Redemption, p. 173.

Christ, p. 109.

Christ, p. 110.

Christ, p. 107.

Christ, p. 108.

Christ, p. 108.

State, p. 160.
43 State, p. 160.
44 State, p. 163.
45 State, p. 165.
46 State, p. 15.
48 State, p. 157.
49 State, p. 157.
50 State, p. 157.
51 State, p. 158.
52 State, p. 158.
53 State, p. 158.
54 State, p. 158.
55 State, p. 159.
56 Plea, p. 10.
57 Plea, p. 10.
58 Plea, p. 25.
59 Plea, p. 25.
60 Plea, pp. 24-25.
61 Redemption, p. 16.
62 Plea, pp. 48-49.
63 Plea, p. 49.
67 plea, p. 23.
68 State, p. 197.
69 State, pp. 196-197.
70 Society, p. 152.
71 Society, p. 45.
72 State, p. 152.
73 State, p. 152.
74 State, p. 162.
75 State, p. 153.
Chapter 2

HERRON'S PROPOSED SOLUTION FOR THE CHURCH'S PROBLEMS

Concern for the quality of life in society was a Christian imperative, Herron continually declared. Christianity, according to the will of its founder, was to be a divine order of human relations in the world. Herron's involvement in the social movement was not inspired by a desire to equalize and increase men's material possessions, but rather by a fervent drive to save their souls.

It is for the sake of the soul that we are saying things about the problems and conditions of society. If the social movement meant simply more bread and a larger bulk of things for each man, we should not be so concerned about its outcome.¹

Every human being must have the freedom to "face the problem of his own life, and make of his life an original and complete contribution to the human whole."² Man must have the freedom to experience an original vision of truth, and "truth is whatever focuses our attention as to bring 'all the life within us into harmony.'"³ Man's freedom was destroyed and his soul kept in bondage by anything that obstructed, bound, or destroyed his freedom to see and live the truth for himself, no matter whether it be a statute law, a religious creed, or an economic condition.⁴

Ultimately, all such restrictions on man's freedom would have to be eliminated if the kingdom were to be realized, for "only the
absolutely freed soul can become the complete social man."

Liberty in the highest sense meant the freedom to joyously and willingly sacrifice oneself in the service of man.

Because contemporary society was founded on a corrupt economic structure, all efforts to resolve social problems (and speed the coming of the kingdom) were reduced to problems of the distribution of wealth. All social distinctions and privileges were accorded on the basis of wealth and economic success. Herron saw a direct correlation between the basis of society and the spiritual liberty of the individual, and under the present system of economic injustice, the individual was denied the freedom to live a moral, just, and sacrificial life.

Our charge against civilization and its economic system is, that it destroys the human soul ... the present industrial order attacks the citadel of every soul's faith, and the foundations of its freedom.

Civilization denied man his ultimate freedom: it denied him the right to do right. Herron described the helplessness and futility of the man who would do right in society but was continually thwarted in his efforts, by the absence of any social machinery through which the spirit of Christ could be expressed. Such a civilization could not endure if the kingdom of God were to become a reality: accepting it would constitute a rejection of Christ.

To accept Christ, his idea and initiative, is to reject a civilization whose motives and methods, whose organized feast and forces, render the Christian life unlivable.

Thus, Christian concern for the soul was the motivation for
social change, because the soul could not reach its fullest development under an economic order that repressed spiritual liberty and inhibited the right of doing right. Until men had the actual freedom to practice and live rightly (i.e., the Christ-life of sacrifice), until the social, political and economic structures of civilization facilitated the right of the individual to do right, the kingdom of God could not be realized.

It was Herron's earnest conviction that the coming of the kingdom was behind all the social problems which beset America in the late nineteenth century.

The kingdom would come through the agency of both God and man. Christ's sacrificial death on the cross had in effect redeemed the world totally and completely. The only thing that still prevented earth from being heaven was the self-will of man. The world would never in actuality be perfectly redeemed until all men abjured selfishness, and, in the example of Christ, made sacrifice the principle of their lives. Thus the redemption of the world was a mutual process: God had made it possible through the sacrifice of his only son, but men had to actualize it in reality by living and sacrificing their selfhood, as Christ had done, for the good of others. This was the doctrine of common atonement. The kingdom would come because Christ had made it possible through his sacrifice, but it would come when men lived out the life of sacrifice in practice.
Herron was possessed by an overwhelming sense of 1) the immediacy of the kingdom, and 2) the imperative urgency of meeting the economic and social crises before it was too late. The present state of human affairs had gone for so long unchecked, Herron realized in 1895, that only "God himself [could] save civilization and our nation."9 God alone would direct an incoming of spiritual power that would cure all social and political ills and establish a society of redeemed institutions, transformed by the spirit of Christ. But although God would ultimately save society, men were not to falsely reason that they were excused from working toward social reform. On the contrary, the concept of common atonement stressed man's obligation to be a working participant in the redemptive process. The sure knowledge that God through Christ will save society will not paralyze our reform activities, nor weaken our sense of social responsibility, nor shake our readiness to be offered in behalf of our brothers, but will divinely energize us to the most strenuous activity, and inspire us to the holiest sacrifice.10

Instead of weakening men's reform efforts, this assurance that God would directly save society himself would only serve as an added incentive for men to work for social redemption. Continued and persistent endeavors in the realm of social reform were urgently and vitally necessary.11

The church also was going to have to undergo massive transformation from its present state if it were to aid in the immediate realization of the kingdom of God on earth. The church would have
to turn its back on its institutional power establishment and become Christ to the society at large. The institutional church was never to be mistaken for the kingdom. God had never intended an institution to constitute the divine society.

The gathering of the peoples under the dominion of a religious institution has never been the idea of God. The purest institutional rule of the world would yet be other than a Christian rule. An institution of religion is not a constitution of society. An institution, always was only a means to an end. Religious institutions had historically obstructed the will of God, and Herron lamented the fact that progress and righteousness had often moved "in the path of the ruins of the world's most sacred institutions." Again such a situation was about to arise, and Herron felt it was his personal mission to rouse the church to an internal regeneration before some great cataclysmic destruction should occur. "I have not spoken," he wrote 5 March 1894, in a preface note for The Christian Society

as some would say, to discredit, but rather to glorify the church. I would save the church from the false position of existing and working for its own glory and religious aggrandizement, from . . . seeking to bring the world under the dominion of itself, and speak some word that would help to convert it to the Christian pursuit of sacrificing itself for the world. The church was engaged in preserving its own artificial organization, rather than in redeeming society. It was defining doctrines, but it was not distinguishing right from wrong in social relations.

The church could exist only as the means to the realizing of
an end, the kingdom. It had to forsake the institutional self-concern which isolated it from meeting the needs of the world's poor, and which caused it to conform, and thereby sanction the materialistic standards of a corrupt society. The church could realize its mission of ushering in the kingdom only by becoming a sacrificial and redemptive life in the world itself.

The only way the church could vitalize itself as such a force in society would be through obeying the call and example of Christ. The church was to be the "medium", Herron declared, through which God would pour Christ on society, thus making society like Christ himself. The church had to become Christ. For Herron, Jesus was the matchless example, the ideal to which all human life must aspire. Simply through obedience to Jesus and his teachings, men could live together in peace and brotherhood: in Jesus could be found the answer to all social, political, and economic problems. The church had been commissioned to lead the world to the belief and practice of the law of love in human society. Herron asserted that this law of love had "always been the law of all being"; it was not distinctly new with the coming of Jesus. Jesus, however, was its most perfect interpreter and exponent. His sacrificial death on the cross was the dramatization of the power of love. The cross had become its symbol, and sacrifice its modus operandi. Herron's writings during the 1890's became progressively more strident in tone as he continued to denounce contemporary economic,
political and social values. His belief in the need of reconstruction of society grew ever more radical. But one thing remained constant: his absolute belief in the sufficiency of Christ as the solvent for all human problems. All men need do, he continually exhorted, was become like Christ through sacrificing their individual lives for the good of the whole. Then love, solidarity, justice, and equality would freely and naturally follow.

In 1891 he entitled the first chapter of his book, The Larger Christ, "The Discovery of Christ--The Need of Our Times." Following an apocalyptic description of the state of the times Herron stated what was to remain the prime assumption of his social thought:

The search for some complete law of justice between man and man, the search for remedies for social ills is essentially a search after the Christ.

He went on to declare that theology, the visible church, society, the state--all must find Christ, for in his sacrifice was the pattern for the solution of all the problems of human beings and their society.

Herron was an advocate of the theory of a common atonement, which held that man was a co-partner with Christ in the redemptive process. Christ's sacrificial death on the cross was not man's release from sacrifice, but rather his obligation to personally sacrifice himself.

No Christian is true to his Christ, nor has grasped the meaning of his cross, who is not a vicarious sufferer for his fellow-men.
Christ's death had been the ultimate revelation of God's design for human society: it showed what the life of man could be like when love and self-denial were valued above all else.

Herron applied this principle of sacrifice to human institutions as well as to individual human beings, because Jesus had brought social deliverance, not merely individual salvation. A redeemed society would function on the principles of love and sacrifice that Christ's death had vindicated. Jesus' interpretation of the kingdom has far more to do with relations, with social facts and forces, than with what we understand by religion. His teachings disclose the kingdom of God as not only a subjective condition, a state of mind, but as an objective and perfectly organized society. They furnish not only a social ideal, but a working principle and a dynamic for its realization.

It was the mission of the modern church to preach and realize these ideals in a corrupted society, in order to bring in the kingdom of love, sacrifice, and brotherhood. But to do this, the church would have to begin anew, and "be born again."

The church would have to become a sacrifice. God was presently calling the church to be Christ to society, and it could fulfill this call only through Christ-like sacrifice. The church would have to sacrifice its own institutional life in becoming a co-partner in Christ's redemption of the world. The reason, Herron declared, that the salvation of the world now seemed in many respects like such a remote possibility was the church's unwillingness to accept the cross of Christ as its own obligation to sacrifice.
The church had succumbed to the temptation which Jesus himself had resisted in the wilderness: it was trying to save the world "with its kingdoms and glory." It was not fulfilling and upholding a common atonement.

The Christian life could be nothing less than a "life of cross-bearing and self-crucifixion in the service of Christ." The church itself would have to live such a life if it were to bring the kingdom into being. "In seeking to save itself the church is losing that which it would save." The church had to offer a cross to mankind. It had to plunge itself into the sin and suffering of humanity, instead of selectively awarding "salvation" to the socially respectable and successful. The church, Herron maintained, could only save others by "suffering out their salvation in fellowship with Christ." For too long the church had uttered empty prayers for the coming of Christ's kingdom, without offering up itself, concommitantly, as a sacrifice for the salvation of the world.

It is morally impossible--and the church of today must be made to know the impossibility--for the world to be saved for Christ, except we, who are his disciples, suffer with Christ in behalf of our fellowmen.

The time had come: Jesus had issued to the Christian church a now-or-never-again ultimatum. "The immediate mission of Christianity," Herron declared, "is the interpretation of all life and work in the light of the kingdom of God."

Herron believed that Christ had been ultimately concerned with
human life in society during his ministry on earth. Jesus had preached a social message, the religion that bore his name had begun as a fellowship and a brotherhood. Throughout history Christ had continued to manifest himself in social cataclysms and be revealed in social movements. Herron now saw Christ to be making his final and ultimate appearance in what Herron perceived to be a rising social consciousness that was beginning to dawn upon the people. Men were becoming aroused against the injustice, the inequity, and the denial of liberty which were finally being seen as the true end-products of a social and economic system based upon the unregulated pursuit of self-interest. Men were becoming aware of their ethical obligations to each other, of their binding social responsibility to "do unto others." What Herron described as a "new kind of conscience" was beginning to crystallize as the old system dissolved itself in strife and chaos. "The responsibility of the individual for the whole human life, the responsibility of the whole for each individual" was its distinctive characteristic. Men were now coming to realize that they were indeed their brothers' keepers, and were bound to cry out against social evils which oppressed their brothers. The eternal law of love, exemplified by Christ and upon which the kingdom would be ordered, was being perceived slowly but with increasing clarity, and for Herron this was a major sign that the evolution of the kingdom was about to commence.

The emergence of social consciousness was as truly a part of
the grand evolutionary design as the physical evolution of plant and animal species. It consisted of the final transcendence of individual self-interest and the development of awareness of the needs of one's fellowmen.

There is slowly waking in men what might be called the consciousness of each other—the consciousness of a power to act together as one man, in the development of one common life and destiny, to which all are to contribute, and of which all are to partake.

Social merit, and not self-interest, was becoming man's determining criterion for action. Social consciousness, in short, meant a shift from an individualistic to a social Weltanschauung.

Herron was responding to the social problems and forces which inspired all social gospel practitioners and social reformers in the 1890's. He became sanguine and optimistic as he viewed the rise of the socialist movement and the labor unions: he was heartened by their appeals to human solidarity and brotherhood. His description of the evidence which he believed supported his theory was less factual than evangelical in content. In 1893 he wrote:

A great idea is now leading the world's thought and lifting its hopes. Everywhere are the signs of universal change. The race is in an attitude of expectancy, straitened until its new baptism is accomplished. Every nerve of society is feeling the first agonies of a great trial that is to try all that dwell upon the earth and issue in a divine deliverance . . . The idea of brotherhood, cooperation, unity is both destroying and recreating the world. The feeling that men were made to stand together, that the race rather than the individual is the unit, is widening and intensifying. The belief that sacrifice and not self-interest is the social foundation, that the
Golden Rule is natural law, is everywhere gaining disciples and power. Men are beginning to see that the welfare of each is the responsibility of all, and the welfare of all the responsibility of each.30

Or, again, in one of the lectures delivered in his nationwide tour of 1895 and published in The Christian State: A Political Vision of Christ:

The discovery of Christ is the reality of our times. The people have found the Christ,—the great peoples collectively as well as men individually,—and are proclaiming their discovery to our economies and institutions. We have found him in the waking social consciousness; in the developing political thought; in the organizations and efforts to reform society; in the moral earnestness and social questioning that make both painful and glorious the upturned faces of great congregations, eager for original inspiration and vital truth; in the social trouble of both rich and poor, each seeking to know if there really be a kingdom of God and a way to realize it upon the earth; in the spiritual life with which our whole nation is quivering, preparing for a great reaping time soon; in his political appearing as Redeemer and Judge of our customs and organizations. Wherever we turn, whether to question or to help, we find the Christ in the need or the faith of men; in the social hope of the organizing activities of the day.31

In other words, the groundswell of social consciousness among the people as a whole was really a mass apprehension of Christ, whether the people realized it as such or not. Outside the province of an institutionalized and self-seeking church, the people had found Christ, and had discovered the reality of the law of love in human relations. They had a vision of Christ, and were ready and waiting to receive him and the establishment of his kingdom.

What, then, should be the church's response to the people? How could it best furnish the faith they craved? Throughout his
writings of the Grinnell period one can trace the gradual development of Herron's conviction that the church's most immediate duty was to preach and to realize the gospel as an economic doctrine. The first step towards social redemption would be the deliverance of the people from economic bondage. Eventually his concern for economic justice came to predominate his later writings of the period, but even as early as 1891 Herron was proclaiming the relevance of the gospel in economic affairs.

The authority of Jesus extends over the bank, the store, the factory, the railway, as truly as over the individual. . . . The principle of Christ's life must be the principle of the market. . . . Whatsoever would have been wrong in Christ is wrong in the stock exchange, in a corporation, in a money-lender, in a pawn shop, in a church . . . .

In 1892 he declared that "the fate of Christianity is at stake in meeting the problems of society and finance." Because the church had been given the gospel it had the responsibility of proclaiming it in its totality, with all its revolutionary social implications.

In 1893 Herron wrote that the church has been given the message that the interest of one man is the interest of all. . . . the church must open the eyes of men to see the wisdom and power of living for the common good, to the practical atheism and anarchism of selfish principles, and declare love to be the natural law of industrial activity and social life.

Herron's thought became increasingly preoccupied with the search for economic justice, and its most forceful exposition is found in his last book published while teaching at Iowa College,
Between Caesar and Jesus. Here Herron dealt more specifically with the two basic suppositions that 1) all social problems were ultimately economic in origin, and 2) the new social conscience of mankind was beginning to grasp the law of love and desired to make it operative in all human relationships in society. In the most general of terms, Herron said, the social problem was

a problem of how to so organize the world that all men may be equally secure in the material means and social resources needed for a complete life.35

The social awakening was, of course, the work of Jesus: it was the culmination of his gospel teaching. For now, for the first time in human history men held a

vision of a life and destiny which belong to the race as a whole; a race life and destiny in which all individuals are to share . . . The new conscience is teaching the individual that his life is a function of this race life, and that he can fulfill his individuality only through fulfilling this function.36

The principles of Jesus, so long held as noble but unrealizable ideals, were beginning to be regarded as practical and workable, as being capable of actualization.

The new social conscience had no time for official organized Christianity. The rising faith of the people was directed towards Christ, Herron noted, but away from Christianity.

To the Christian religion and its official attitude, there is the strongest antipathy and social distrust; for Jesus, there is an increasing reverence and social loyalty . . .37

The church was not proclaiming Christ, it was advancing itself;
and the social conscience of the people, pledged as it was to Jesus, discerned the church's sham and hypocrisy and would have no part of it. The existing institutional church, Herron declared, had outlived its usefulness, and like all social structures, it was subject to evolutionary change, and now had no recourse but to adapt or die out. Its ideal of individualistic religiousness must come to an end because something greater was needed. Here Herron used the analogy of a worn out piece of clothing: the garment itself and its past utility are not denounced by saying that the garment is worn out and a better and more useful one is needed.

I merely say that the present organization of Christianity has done its work, however great its value as an historic provision, and that it is hence no longer adequate and constructive, but rather baffling and destructive.38

God had wrought many things through the institutional church during the history of its existence, but to blindly conserve and preserve it because of its past achievements was to ignore the revelation of God to be found in the present social crisis. The people had caught a glimpse of Christ in their midst, and were demanding a new and vital religion of Jesus. The realization of the religion of Jesus was necessary before the kingdom of God could come.39

Thus the church stood at the crossroads of the social crisis. In its present form it was ignored by the people who desired a new and living faith in Christ. They perceived that the church
was not offering Christ, but an institutionalized, dessicated cor-
ruption of his gospel instead. If the church were to meet the
needs of the people and furnish the faith they urgently craved for
social salvation, then it must unflinchingly bring forth

a new Christian synthesis in the form of an economic
statement of the teachings of Jesus—an economic law
of his love.\textsuperscript{40}

The relevance of the gospel and the law of love to economic mat-
ters was an undeniable implication of Christ's teaching, one which
the church had for centuries suppressed. Now it could no longer
remain silent because the new social conscience had discovered
Jesus outside the realm of institutional religion, and was demand-
ing that the church proclaim Christ, and not conventional Christ-
ianity, to society. The church thus had an imperative mandate
from the people to preach the total sufficiency of Christ as the
savior of society, the solvent of social problems. And this could
mean nothing less than the total acceptance of

the full logic of his teachings, with all the communism
and the liberty from institutional authority which these
teachings mean \ldots \textsuperscript{41}

God himself was behind the contemporary social unrest, Herron
believed, and was making through it a new and triumphant dispen-
sation of his grace. Society was in travail, about to give birth
to a new social order that would become the kingdom. He offered
only a few speculations about the specific method of God's new
revelation, but he generally believed the new social dispensation
would take the form of a great political-revival of religion that
would fill the church with a fervent Christ-spirit. Only through a national and totally unique form of religious revival could the broad and thorough-going application of Christ, which was the prerequisite of social salvation, be made to the purposes of the nation.

I see no other hope for our nation, no other redemption for society, than a religious revival such as the world has never known, that shall enthrone Christ in our national ideals, and give men the common will and the power to put the Christ life into social practice. A larger knowledge of the revelation of God in Christ, a new vision of Christ in the world, must prepare the way for saving society through a regenerated national life.

A thread of the messianic mission of the American nation is randomly woven throughout Herron's writings of the 1890's. America, he believed, was part of God's evolutionary social design: it was the divinely established revelation of political democracy, the first fruit of the rule of the people.

God created and sent our nation to be an example and a witness of the power and wisdom of Christ unto the political salvation of the world. He appointed and anointed this nation to seek and fulfill the righteousness of his kingdom.

But America had failed its divine mission: it was a fallen and apostate nation which had betrayed the freedom for which the founding fathers had sacrificed so selflessly. "We have used," charged Herron, "the liberty wherewith their sacrifice made us free to rob and oppress one another." The nation was sick and corrupt, and now was the time to heal and restore it, and heed God's call to national repentance.
Except our nation repent, turning from political sin to social righteousness, it cannot be saved, and will lose its divine place in the earth.  

Herron took hope and courage in what he discerned to be a rising social consciousness among the American people. He believed the American nation was becoming convicted of its sin and the betrayal of its destiny, just as it was unconsciously espousing Christ as the social model. The increased awareness of spiritual force in society was to be the beginning of the great national spiritual revival. In fact, Herron believed, the Christian revival had already come.

Our social conviction of sin, the heaviness of the divine hand on the national conscience, is the sign that the Christ is in the midst of our nation, and his judgments are our hope of redemption in righteousness. The manifest evidence of the reviving presence of Christ is the fact that men and institutions are being practically judged by his teachings.

The revival would be different from any previous revival: instead of being directed towards individuals, it would be distinctly social in character and appeal, and would have a great effect on the church. Herron conjectured that if the institutional church would even know what was happening, the new social revival would have

so little of the old individualistic ground of appeal and growth that the church will probably be overwhelmed by its power ere professional Christianity discerns the revival's presence.

Social salvation was not contingent on the salvation of every single individual within the society itself. The social principles
of Christ's gospel could organize human relations long before every individual personally espoused them, just as Christendom had become "an organized reality in some degree permeated and ruled by the Christ spirit . . . long before the nations had any Christian conception of law and government . . . " The machinery of government, politics, industry and economics could be Christianized long before the bulk of the citizenry was consciously converted to the Christ life.

The church had been divinely commissioned to lead in the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. During the course of the centuries since Christ had been on earth, the church from time to time had mistaken its own institutional organization for the divine society it was to help prepare on earth, and it had lost sight of its high calling. Now such an impasse had again been reached, and the church was going to have to restructure its priorities one last time in order to bring in the kingdom. As part of the evolutionary moral development of the race, men everywhere were beginning to see Christ as the answer to the vexing social questions of the day. Outside the church, Herron maintained, men had come to see Christ as the matchless example for all human relationships in society, and the church was now being pressed by the people to give them a living social faith in Christ. It was George Davis
Herron's tenacious conviction that the first and immediate step the church must take was to establish the primacy of Christ in economic affairs, for all other political and social ills stemmed from the cancerous and competitive economic system.
As an example, Herron cited his own plight. Speaking before the Christian Citizenship League of Chicago in October 1898, he pointed up the ironic denial of his own right to do personal right.

I cannot come from Iowa College to this city, to speak to you of Chicago against the existing order of things, without riding upon a railway system, the capitalization of which is largely watered stock . . . In all this corrupt exploitation . . . I am obliged to participate in order to travel anywhere upon the national highways . . . Yet it is my divine right as a son of God, and as a freeborn citizen, to travel national highways built by the social service and political purity of the people, by good-will, virtue and the common love. The only possible innocence that remains to me, while I pay forced tribute to the system, while I profit by its corrupting influences and agencies, while I bear my part in the culpable public ignorance and guilty moral apathy, is that of protest and exhaustless effort. (Between, p. 20-22)
first actually getting progress started. He declared that you must first move the ship, then steer it, and considered his task of getting the ship moving, leaving it up to others to chart its specific course. He saw that many social reformers worked at cross-purposes on specific issues even though their fundamental aims were similar. He urged all social and political reformers to unite behind certain basic measures, and to work to implement them through available Constitutional means. In this way proportional representation, civil service reform, government ownership of railways, and government control of production of certain vital goods and services could be actualized. (State, p. 104)

12 Society, p. 55.
13 Society, p. 56.
14 Society, p. 8.
15 Society, p. 55.
16 Between, p. 187.

17 Beneath the crustal selfishness of our civilization, beneath the awful peace of this second Augustan age, there is the rumble of uprising revolutions, which threaten to disrupt society and engulf nations. A dreadful and prophetic unrest possesses the breast of the earth. The insurging woes of centuries of wrong are swelling the great heart of humanity . . . The Lord ariseth to shake terribly the earth. The spirit travails with the birth of a new Pentecost—though there may be the preparation of a new crucifixion. There is a new Apocalypse in the heavens, and the Messianic glory of the future is streaming in to light up the problems of the present. The serving peoples of the earth are holding in their fury with the reins of a Messianic hope. (Christ, p. 21-22)

18 Christ, p. 22.
19 Society, p. 113.
20 Between, p. 192.
21 Plea, p. 20.
22 Christ, p. 66.
23 Redemption, p. 149.
24 Redemption, p. 149.
Redemption, p. 148.

Redemption, p. 148.

Society, p. 81.

Between, p. 15.

State, p. 18.

Redemption, p. 15.

State, p. 40.

Christ, pp. 32-33.

Plea, p. 41.

Redemption, pp. 39-40.

Between, p. 15.

Between, p. 17.

Between, p. 183.

Between, p. 198.

Between, p. 195.


State, p. 183.

State, p. 179.


State, p. 190.

State, p. 190.

State, pp. 198-199.
State, p. 199.
Chapter 3

HERRON'S PERSONAL COMMITMENT

In this section I shall attempt to relate my own impression of the nature of Herron's personal commitment to the church as particularly exemplified during his years of teaching at Iowa College. I shall try to show that Herron was above all else a religious enthusiast who believed that his own inner inspiration 1) obviated the need for a scholarly methodology and approach to ideas, and 2) led him to espouse his own views and their righteousness so exclusively that he came to disregard any hold the church might have on him. Herron was able to sustain commitment to the church only so long as it continued to praise and encourage his ideas and his own personal role as a modern Jeremiah. When he began to come under fire for proclaiming his own teachings "Herronism" instead of applying Christianity, Herron was able to part company with the institutions of the church serenely believing in the superlative merit of his own convictions. One is at times tempted to think that in Herron's mind, the refusal of the church to follow him served only to reinforce and validate his self-styled prophetic pretensions. Historically the church had always spurned prophets—even Christ himself had been rejected by the Jewish "church". There is also evidence to support the contention that Herron,
believing as fervently as he did that he was God's personal confi-
dant, felt himself set above conventional social proprieties. I
shall refer to this point briefly in a biographical afterword. Any
historical analysis of Herron and his thought must bear in mind
that Herron was first and foremost a preacher. His writings do
not reveal him to have been a philosopher, a theologian, or a
scholar in the traditional academic sense. He can justly be placed
in the tradition of anti-intellectual religious enthusiasm.

Herron believed he was bearing a divine message from God to
America and he was convicted of the righteousness of his own be-
liefs. This divine personal inspiration enabled him, or so he
thought, to disregard the necessary training and methodology re-
quired of the serious scholar. He was a preacher with a specif-
ic message he believed was absolute truth, and which he felt im-
pelled to spread, and he was not involved with the pursuit of truth
for truth's sake.

As has been mentioned in the foregoing discussion of Herron's
concept of the church, his message centered around a benevolent,
loving and immanent God who sacrificed his son Jesus Christ on the
cross to redeem the world. From this Herron inferred that sacrifice
was the fundamental principle of life, and Jesus was the perfection
of the sacrificial life which all men were called to live. Sacri-
ifice constituted the denial of self in living for others. Be-
cause God was their common father, all men were thus brothers.
Human society in the world was destined to be a community of brotherhood, and history revealed the progressive evolution of this divinely-ordained society which, when attained, would constitute the kingdom of God on earth. The church's historical obligation was to prepare for the advent of the kingdom. The present crisis of society could be nothing other than a final dispensation of God's grace to usher in the kingdom, and the church must now right its corrupted course and seize upon this divine opportunity to establish the kingdom. Currently society at large and the church in particular were sanctioning the ideal of competition, which was the antithesis of sacrifice. The church's immediate task was to preach the relevance of Christ and his sacrificial ideal to economic matters, and give support to all constructive efforts to eliminate the competitive economy which was ultimately the cause of all current social calamities.

This, Herron believed, was the divinely-inspired message God had given him to deliver, and he was profoundly convinced of the absolute and inevitable righteousness of his beliefs and his personal role. He simply did not concern himself with an objective and logical approach to ideas, nor did he feel the need for a thorough-going analytical and rational justification for his beliefs. There are two basic reasons which help to explain Herron's approach to ideas: 1) he lacked a good formal and theological education, and 2) he was a believer in inner inspiration.
1) Herron never had extensive formal elementary and secondary education. His childhood was spent on a farm in Indiana where he was tutored by his father, and during adolescence he worked as an apprentice. He never completed an undergraduate course of study and lacked extensive training in formal systematic theology. He attended Ripon College for three years, whereupon he was ordained. He never attended a seminary.

2) Herron was an ardent believer in inner inspiration—in the subjective intuitive perception of truth. He believed truth could be discovered more readily through emotional experience than through rational inquiry. He never doubted that he was the bearer of a divinely-given revelation from God to the church in late nineteenth-century America, and that this intuitively-perceived dispensation obviated both the training and the logical and expository methodology of the scholar. He believed he had experienced a personal revelation of the new truth, and expected the church to heed him. In his "Confession of Faith" before the examiners of the Burlington congregation, Herron's very first sentence revealed the priority he placed on the personal experience of religious truth:

What I have to present to you is a confession of my Christian faith, as it has grown out of my religious experience, rather than an outline of theological opinions.¹ (emphasis mine)

And later on he added:

God has given unto me, experience by experience, new and larger revelations of his truth and has shown me what he has for me to do.²
These two considerations, his lack of formal training, and his belief in inner inspiration can, when taken together, explain many of the logical inconsistencies and the highly generalized character of Herron's writings. They also help in explaining the non-scholarly nature of Herron's approach to ideas, and his not-always-latent anti-intellectualism.

Herron had neither the mind nor the training of a scholar who wrestles carefully and judiciously with an idea and all its manifold implications before making an evaluation. He was in fact just the opposite: he approached ideas not in their total integrity, but rather through the refracting lens of his own preconceptions. An interesting example of this quality of Herron's mind is his interpretation of historical social evolution. It was widely believed during the late nineteenth century that in the evolutionary process all members of the same species were in competition for survival, and that only the most aggressive and adaptable organisms would survive. This basic biological principle was likewise extended to explain social progress in human society by many social philosophers. Competition among individuals was believed to be the law of social progress. Herron's view of social development also centered around the belief in evolutionary progress. But the whole nature of competition was diametrically opposed to Herron's inspired belief in sacrifice as the fundamental life principle. Competition was the pursuit of selfishness, while sacrifice was the
dying of self in living for others. Therefore he would have been in something of a bind had he not looked at current evolutionary social theory through his sacrifice-colored glasses and "discovered" that

the struggle for life has never been fundamentally competitive, and is on its way to become wholly altruistic . . . In nature it is the co-operative forces that prevail. A more scientific interpretation of history than we have had, will reveal the altruistic and sacrificial forces to have been the makers of progress.³

Herron could not believe that his own first principles were anything other than absolute truth, contemporary opinion and scholarship notwithstanding. He would simply modify contradicting evidence to conform to his preconceptions, and in this case, predicted that a more "scientific" approach to the problem would eventually confirm his interpretation.

Herron approached not only ideas but whole disciplines of study with the same disregard of objective rational scrutiny. Because he believed all life was a reflection of the unity of the relationship of God and man, everything that happened in human life could be traced to divine causation. The vogue of scientism was very strong in the 1890's. However, for Herron "scientific" did not mean dispassionate pursuit of objective phenomena; but rather the application of his own sacrificial ideology. An idea or a discipline was "scientific" when it advanced sacrifice as the fundamental life principle and when it pointed to the realization of the kingdom. God was working through every aspect of human life to
bring about the divine society, the kingdom. Herron argued that all men had to do was look at the true facts and they would come to the same conclusion. His conviction of the coming of the kingdom so possessed Herron's mind that he was unable to view any branch of study as existing independently: any academic discipline which was not centered around the coming of the kingdom and the ideal of sacrifice had just not yet "evolved" to the fullness of its potential.

His attitude towards the study of sociology illustrates this contention. Herron believed contemporary sociology was not yet scientific. It merely concerned itself with the observance and recording of facts. For sociology to become truly scientific it would have to be concerned with "moral causes" and become "a science of redemption." Sociology (and all other fields of study) must have "a ground in faith" to be considered scientific according to Herron's inspired definition.

Herron further revealed the non-scholar's approach to ideas by his indiscriminate generalizations and the indefiniteness and lack of precision with which he used words. He could readily generalize from a few debatable particulars to a grand universal design, with no other authority than his own "inspired" intuition to guide him. His conception of the kingdom of God is a case in point. Nowhere in Scripture is the kingdom of God explicitly defined or thoroughly explained. The meaning of the term has been the subject
of centuries of theological discussion. All sort of conflicting evidence can be culled from the Bible to support or refute any one particular definition. Yet from the highly non-specific, scattered, and varying references made to the kingdom of God in the Bible, Herron was able to construct a grand design of social salvation which he believed was thoroughly realizable and imminently impinging upon human society in the 1890's.

Herron couched his ideas in vague and non-explicit language. Just as he rarely felt pressed to discuss specific remedies for the social problems he detected in contemporary society, he hardly ever defined the terms employed in the discussion of his inspired message. Each of the key terms Herron used, "Christ", "kingdom of God", "sacrifice", "brotherhood" to name only a few, has its own nexus of interpretive connotations, which makes restriction to a single specific meaning impossible. Herron may have had an inspired feeling about what his words and ideas specifically meant, but his use of language was so indefinite that the reader is often uncertain as to what Herron was actually saying. This non-specific quality of Herron's language was also noted by several of his contemporaries.

The Rev. H. Paul Douglass, in a highly favorable review of Herron's teachings, saw Herron as a prophet, analogous to the "pre-exilic Hebrew prophets." This "prophetic role", however, involved Herron "in difficulties in the use of words." His terminology was
not clearly defined, and his meaning was consequently misunderstood, but Douglass admonished:

the prophet is ever under the obligation of conquering the linguistic wealth of the old dispensation for the new truth.⁹

The Rev. A. A. Baker, in a brief commentary on Herron's teachings and methodology declared that Herron had "a natural unfitness for clear thinking and accurate statements", ¹⁰ which, combined with his lack of solid theological training, resulted in Herron's inaccurate scriptural interpretations and the rambling and imprecise quality of his rhetoric.

At least once in his writings of the 1890's Herron revealed a blatant anti-intellectual strain. His belief in the urgent righteousness of his intuitive truth moved him to bitterly cry out against the forces of reason and moderation. Even if a prophet (as he believed himself to be) did not "understand what the new order is to be or by what steps it is to come", he must, in the tradition of John the Baptist and all the prophets, "pronounce the doom of the old order and herald the new."¹¹ Therefore the modern-day prophet must not despair when criticized by contemporary scholars and pragmatists for not having a specific, step-by-step social program. The prophet should rest assured that his vision of truth is more powerful than all the "clear thinking" in the world.

Let us not be betrayed by the demand of the scribes that we wait for their 'clear thinking', and that we act with their 'moderation.' We must keep a divine poise, of course, and be serene withal, but with a serenity shot
through with the fires of an exalted enthusiasm for the justice of love, and the liberty thereof . . . It is not primarily the sort of moderation and clear thinking for which the scientific and prudent call, but high and holy passion that teaches and changes the world. The light in which progress finds its ascending way always shines from the white heat of spiritual passion . . . 12

The economic crisis would not be met by the "so-called clear thinking of the schools" but rather by "the rich social feeling of the friends of Jesus who love not their own life unto death." 13

In sum, Herron was a preacher, not a scholar. He was not well-trained in the rigors of scholarly insight and analysis, and instead of believing in reason as the source of true understanding, he believed the emotions were the source of man's perception of truth. His belief in his own God-given inspiration was passionate and intense, and led him to have certain prophetic—even messianic—delusions about his personal role. It was this attitude on Herron's part which, I think, was basically responsible for his ultimate break with the church.

As has been noted earlier, Herron believed God continued to reveal himself to each succeeding generation with the same power and clarity manifested during Christ's life on earth. God spoke, as always, through living men, inspiring them with messages for their own day and age. God, he believed, had spoken just as surely and clearly through men like St. Francis, Wycliff, Savonarola, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley as he had through the Hebrew prophets.

The church had been at best hesitant in accepting the messages of inspired prophets. In most cases it had, just as the Jews
outrightly refused to heed divinely inspired exhortations. Herron believed the church had a long history of denying the validity of individually inspired messengers from God. It had frequently been plunged into great upheavals because it had either refused to listen or had heeded too late the warnings of contemporary prophets.

Herron, I believe, placed himself squarely within this prophetic tradition. He believed in a subjective and emotional experiencing of religion, which he held to be more valid than rational perception and knowledge. References to the righteousness of passion and enthusiasm dot Herron's writings of the 1890's, and always seem to have an aggressive yet defensive thrust. He sought to justify these contentions not only by citing the authority of his own experiences, but also by citing the historical example of Jesus. Jesus, he declared, had been a religious enthusiast, whose teachings recorded in the gospel revealed the correctness of an emotional approach to religious understanding:

    life precedes knowledge; love leads into truth,
    spiritual facts are discovered by spiritual experience.14

Jesus personally knew the trials and tribulations that came with bearing an original inspiration, and from this sure knowledge all other inspired messengers from God could draw comfort when their inspirations were heaped with scorn by their contemporaries. Jesus had also been rejected by the Jewish church of his day, to which he had been sent to witness, because he was the bearer of an original inspiration. Herron believed that this historical parallel
also applied to modern religious enthusiasts in their relationships with the organized church.

Throughout the 1890's Herron was a part of the organized church. He was an ordained Congregationalist minister, and even after he assumed his duties at Iowa College he was still institutionally affiliated and supported by the church. Iowa College was a very evangelically-oriented institution, supported by the Congregational church at large, but particularly by the Iowa congregations. So even though he no longer was in a parish, Herron was still a professional clergyman while he was holding the chair of applied Christianity.

From the beginning of Herron's tenure at Grinnell he and the college held differing views of what the professorship of applied Christianity was to involve. This difference, I have found, deepened and became more apparent as the years went by. The college intended the professorship to be one actively involved in the program it offered its students, particularly its most mature and able students. Only upperclassmen were to be eligible to register for Herron's courses, the intention being that the course in applied Christianity would pull all the loose ends of a liberal arts education together and unify it with the purpose of making Christianity an active and relevant force in daily human life. The college hoped to train young men and women who would then go out into the churches and work to organize the kingdom of God. It
viewed the department of applied Christianity as being a catalytic agent which would affect the church through the inspired young workers for the kingdom who were trained and sent out from Iowa College. The college also hoped the department would be actively involved in training and supporting local pastors in their efforts to realize the kingdom.

From the day of his acceptance of the position Herron, however, held a somewhat differing concept. He declared in his resignation letter to the Burlington congregation in 1893:

I believe God has sent me with this message of a new redemption through his Son. I must go as I am sent. The chair of Christianity, endowed in memory of a noble and honored member of this church, opens the way for me to speak to the church at large . . . I go to witness to the righteousness of society and the nation.15 (emphasis mine)

This seems to indicate clearly that Herron regarded the Iowa College position as providing a nation-wide platform from which he could declaim his personal message. As time was to go by, the College itself began to realize that Herron's basic commitment did indeed fall in the direction of propagating his own theological and increasingly socialistic theories, and not in advancing the welfare of the church, the College, or its students.

A recently discovered report to President George Gates from a special faculty committee dates the College's first formal inquiry into its uneasy concerns about Herron's conduct of the chair of applied Christianity to sometime in 1895, within Herron's second
year at Iowa College. The committee of five professors affirmed its confidence in the purposes for which the chair had been established, and declared Herron's courses were having a "decidedly favorable" influence upon the students.16 But the committee was disturbed by Herron's "public utterances" which were too highly critical and overtly censorious in nature, and were undermining public confidence in the College.

The spirit of criticism, unless disarmed, and of distrust, unless dissipated, soon ripen to alienation, and alienation means loss of students and cessation of gifts, a state of things by all means to be avoided, if possibly it can be done consistently with truth and right.17

The committee then enjoined Herron to be patient and temperate, and to bear in mind the highly-charged nature of the situation at the College. It added an interesting note: although it "would not interfere with the liberty of anyone connected with the College so to speak as the spirit may move", it still felt that anyone who was a professor at the College should understand that "the great field of his labor is in and for the College." It was Herron's and every professor's obligation to labor that the college's various departments should be so balanced, unified, and perfected as to make it the greater possible power for the coming of the kingdom.18

Herron's work at Iowa College and the nature of his personal commitment to the church came under increasing scrutiny from the press, the state Congregational organization, and from within the College itself. During the years 1896-1898 Herron spent a great
deal of time during the academic year away from the campus. He spent the entire winter of 1896-1897 with Mrs. Rand and her daughter Carrie at the Rand's villa outside Florence, Italy, recovering from a physical and emotional collapse. An editorial in an undated clipping from the *Grinnell Herald* charged that Herron spent over one-half his time away from the campus making personal appearances and private excursions all over the country.

In 1898 Col. John Meyer, a Civil War veteran who had held a seat on the Board of Trustees of Iowa College for over thirty years, published a lengthy, almost violently-worded attack on Herron's teachings and his conduct of his position at the College entitled "Herronism Exposed." It was first printed in its entirety as a news item in Des Moines and Grinnell papers. Col. Meyer reprimanded Herron for his absences from the campus and assailed his erroneous Scriptural interpretations and unsound economic and political theories. In his five years at the College, Meyer calculated, Herron had been on campus 100 out of 165 school weeks. His teaching responsibilities amounted to between five and eight hours per week, and from his base salary of $2500, when figured by the hour spent in the classroom, Herron earned the unheard of sum of $15.62 for every hour of teaching. This Col. Meyer found intolerable. His fundamental charge against Herron was that Herron was using the College as a national podium for his own philosophy, while in actual practice scorning and ignoring his responsibility to teach Biblical
Christianity and to uphold the College and the church which supported it. Herron seemed devoted solely to "Herronism"—nothing else, including contractual obligations, seemed to matter. Col. Meyer imparted a closing admonition:

The instructor of applied Christianity, instead of working and trying to spread himself all over the world outside of his territory, should strive to become acquainted in every field, and sow seed to produce students for the college.19

Col. Meyer's article reflected his personal animosity against Herron. He based his charges for the most part on his own reactions to Herron's ideas and activities, and did not have objective contributing evidence and the support of additional observers to endorse his opinions. A far more temperate and rational report was delivered in May 1898 at the Annual Meeting of the General Congregational Association of Iowa, by the Rev. Clinton Douglas, who was chairman of the committee appointed by the Association to visit Iowa College and report specifically on the nature and effectiveness of Herron's work and his commitment towards the church.

The report began with a short summary of the church's high hopes for the department of applied Christianity when it was established in 1893. The church intended that students at the College would be inspired with "new ideas and new plans and methods" gleaned from the applied Christianity program to go out into the churches and work for the kingdom. Essentially the church hoped the new department would make students doers of the word who would constitute "a good reinforcement to the workers for Christ and the
church in Iowa and the world."\(^{21}\) The church hoped the program would supply recruits for mission fields both abroad and at home.

But what was the current status and effectiveness of the program on the Iowa College campus? When he began teaching in 1893 Herron had had to use the chapel as a classroom because it was the largest available facility which could accommodate the students who thronged to hear him. But by 1898, the committee noted, Herron was using the smallest classroom in the College. His many absences on speaking tours and personal trips made him almost an infrequent visitor to the campus. When he was in Grinnell, the committee observed, Herron made "no effort to become personally acquainted with the students or the citizens of the town."\(^{22}\) The influence Herron did have over some students was, in the committee's view, hardly salutary. He alienated them from the church and served:

- to make them careless about Sabbath observance and church attendance;
- to make them sneer at the great missionary enterprises of our churches;
- to make them scoff at all evangelistic efforts to win individuals for Christ;
- to make them doubt the authority of the Bible and to send them out into the world with their Christian faith shattered.\(^{23}\)

Instead of teaching students to apply Christianity the committee felt Herron was destroying Christian principles and doctrines and espousing his own radical concepts for restructuring the church because in his view, it was a corrupt institution. He did not uplift the faith nor give courage to the area pastors and churchmen who had also held such high hopes for the contributions a program of applied Christianity could make to their own efforts.
The committee concluded that there existed a gradual and growing feeling that Herron was teaching Herronism and not Christianity as it was understood by the church. Herron had been hired to teach applied Christianity, and in the view of the committee, he was no longer teaching it.

It is not against the teaching of Applied Christianity, but against the teaching of Prof. Herron and its results that disapproval is so openly and emphatically spoken on every hand.24

Criticism and denunciation of Herron's teachings concerning the nature of the church and its economic involvement continued to be part of the growing movement against him which gained momentum during the last two years of the decade. The faculty was divided, the students were divided, and despite the endeavors of Col. Meyer, the trustees remained divided on whether or not Herron should be asked to resign. At the annual spring commencement meeting of the Trustees in 1899, Meyer's move to fire Herron was successfully blocked by President Gates and Mrs. Rand. It was only a matter of time however, before Herron would voluntarily offer his resignation. In October he was finally able to persuade Mrs. Rand that he wanted to resign, and he wrote a long letter of resignation to the Trustees.

Although generally moderate and conciliatory in tone, Herron's letter still reveals a slight undertone of contempt that the College did not support his teachings. When he had accepted the professorship, Herron reminded the Trustees,
I also stated that I could make no promises or enter into no covenant, save to be true to the truth as I understood it, at whatever cost.25

He had come to Iowa College in good faith, he declared, thinking that the institution was "prepared for whatever might come."26

Herron asserted that he expected to always and everywhere teach . . . the common and equal right of all men to the earth and its resources, as their common inheritance from God. The faith that it is true, and that it must ultimately be applied is dearer to me than my bread of life.27

But, he added,

I recognize that the constituency of this College is equally sincere in believing such teaching to be dangerous and untrue.28

Although during his seven years at Iowa College Herron felt he had "put no little of my life" into the College, he was now seriously wondering if an existing college or university is any place for the sort of work I am trying to do. I do not know that a present day educational institution can make any place for the mere apostle of an ideal . . . the truth is always rudely and imperfectly stated by its earlier apostles.29

During his tenure as professor of applied Christianity Herron's basic theological assumptions remained fairly constant. He continued to espouse sacrifice as the true organizing principle for all life in society, and his devotion to Jesus remained compelling. Yet his social thought careened towards the left. In his 1891 Minneapolis speech "The Message of Jesus to Men of
Wealth" Herron did little more than exhort the wealthy to be good stewards, in the tradition of Andrew Carnegie. By 1899, however, he could unequivocally declare that "communism and equality are the only logical and obedient economic expressions of our Lord's teachings." Social and economic themes came to predominate his later writings. He simply was not preaching the same methods of applying Christian principles to life in society at the time of his resignation that he had affirmed when he began his professorship.

As his theory of common ownership developed, Herron exhorted the church to assume moral and practical leadership in his economic crusade. When immediate response and support of his self-proclaimed inspiration was not forthcoming, Herron's suspicion of the inert force of institutional self-perpetuation was confirmed. Herron was part of that tradition of religious enthusiasts and reformers who feel great need of a cortege of believers to follow in their train. He needed to have reinforcement from supporters—he needed to have an audience to cheer him on. This sort of reinforcement had been present during his first years at Iowa College, when student, faculty, and local church enthusiasm for the applied Christianity program was running high. But as Herron's social and economic theories became more extreme, he came to constitute something of a liability to the College and to the church, and the support and reinforcement of his preaching and his prophetic role
were no longer as easily forthcoming. The original support and enthusiasm became mingled with questioning and criticism.

Instead of acknowledging Herron as a prophet and believing his message to be divinely inspired, the church and the College were critical of the way Herron neglected traditional orthodox Christianity in favor of preaching his own economic interpretation of the Christian message. The church did not acquiesce to Herron's command that it implement his economic theories. Because he believed his inspired exhortations were not going to be heeded by the church, and because the College was no longer supporting either his teachings or his personal sense of mission, Herron decided he would have to free himself from the bonds which held him to the College, and the church which supported it.
Chapter 3

3 *State*, pp. 88-89.
4 *Society*, p. 23.
5 *Society*, p. 18.
6 *Society*, p. 23.
7 Douglass, p. 274.
8 Douglass, p. 275.
9 Douglass, p. 275.
11 *Between*, p. 239.
12 *Between*, pp. 239-240.
13 *Between*, p. 240.
14 *Christ*, p. 94.
15 "Gates' Address," p. 3.
16 Report to President George Gates regarding the Professorship of Applied Christianity, from an appointed committee of the faculty of Iowa College, p. 1, MS, Vol. I, The Herron Papers, Grinnell College Library, Grinnell Room Collection.
17 "Faculty Report," p. 2.
18 "Faculty Report," p. 3.


27 "Resignation," p. 3.

28 "Resignation," p. 3.

29 "Resignation," p. 4.

30 Between, p. 112.
A BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERWORD

The final denouement of Herron's career in the church occurred after he no longer held the chair of applied Christianity. Herron continued to retain his permanent residence in Grinnell the year after he quit teaching at Iowa College. On 23 March 1901 Mrs. Mary Everhard Herron was granted a divorce from her husband George Davis Herron in district court in Algona, Iowa, on grounds of mental cruelty. She was given custody of their four children. Two months later Herron and Miss Carrie Rand were married in a highly unusual ceremony in the New York City townhouse of her mother. The couple exchanged no formal wedding vows to take each other as husband and wife—they merely pledged to each other to be life companions. Herron and Miss Rand had frequently traveled together during his speaking engagements while at Iowa College, and he had spent a great deal of time at the Rand home during the last years of his professorship because Mrs. Rand and Carrie remained absolutely devoted to Herron's teachings and his personal mission. After their marriage Carrie and George Herron established the Rand School of Socialism in New York City, designed to accommodate the very prophetic ideals Herron had declared in his resignation letter were not capable of realization in any existing educational institution. Immediately, scandal surrounded Herron's
divorce and remarriage to Carrie Rand. The following winter the First Congregational Church of Grinnell excommunicated him from membership in the organized church.
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