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William Dean Howells' Criticism of Religion in *The Minister's Charge*

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I

The Minister's Charge; Or, The Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker (1887) is the "first novel affected by Howells' shift of interest from individual to social ethics" (Taylor 243) and it reflects the influence of Tolstoyan humanitarianism (Bennett 167-71). In the fall of 1885, while he was writing *The Minister's Charge*, Howells became acquainted with the novels and theological writings of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), of which experience he wrote enthusiastically in many of his books and magazine articles (Cady 7-8). In one of his articles titled "Lyof N. Tolstoy," Howells writes:

[Tolstoy's] literature both in its ethics and aesthetics, or its union of them, was an experience for me somewhat comparable to the old-fashioned religious experience of people converted at revivals. Things that were dark or dim before were shone upon by a light so clear and strong that I needed no longer grope my way to them What I had instinctively known before, I now knew rationally. (461)

Tolstoy caused Howells to reaffirm the beliefs he had with some degree of conviction. In his introduction to an English translation of Tolstoy's *Sebastopol*, published in 1887, Howells writes that Tolstoy "is precisely the human being with whom at this moment I find myself in the greatest intimacy; not because I know him, but because I know myself through him" (3). More importantly, Tolstoy showed Howells what to write about in

fiction, so that from that time on, Howells' fiction took on "a new intensity, a consciously larger vision" (Bennett 162) and a distinct moral purpose (Dawes 100). In view of these significant factors, it is understandable that Howells' doctrine of Complicity, explicitly stated in this novel, echoes the ideas of Tolstoy.

The Rev. David Sewell is the minister in *The Minister's Charge*. Sewell was given a minor role in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), in which he helped the Laphams overcome various psychological and moral crises. For one thing, he averted the possible mismatch of Tom Corey and Irene Lapham by his "good sense" (240-42; ch. 18). In his final conversation with Silas Lapham, Sewell made a comment which in a way foreshadowed the kind of moral problem Sewell was to deal with in *The Minister's Charge*.

"Sometimes," [Lapham] said, "I get to thinking it all over, and it seems to me I done wrong about Rogers in the first place; that the whole trouble came from that. It was just like starting a row of bricks. . . ."

"We can trace the operation of evil in the physical world," replied the minister, "but I'm more and more puzzled about it in the moral world. . . ." (364; ch. 27)

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Sewell appeared to be an able clergyman, giving long lectures on ethical conduct and speaking firmly against the false ideals of self-sacrifice to the Laphams. In *The Minister's Charge*, Howells makes Sewell espouse exactly the same things, but with a more complex purpose. Sewell, though reluctant, gets involved in a more difficult situation and struggles endlessly, but he never comes to grips with his problems. By delineating a minister, Sewell, who is incapable of meeting problems squarely, Howells gives an example of poor ministry in a Protestant church. Insightful studies of Howells' religious concept and criticism have been made by several scholars, and a reading of *The Minister's Charge* as a phase of Howells' religious criticism is certainly not original.¹ The purpose of this

study, therefore, is to examine more extensively than heretofore Howells' method of religious criticism in the novel through detailed analysis of its plot, characters and other fictional elements.

II

In *The Minister's Charge*, Howells presents several serious social problems, and by way of solving them, he develops at least one concrete idea, the so-called doctrine of Complicity, which reflects Howells' profound interest in the welfare of mankind from a humanitarian motive. In this sense, the novel is the precursor of Howells' sociological novels beginning with *Annie Kilburn* (1891) (Cooke 206). Clara and Rudolf Kirk characterize *The Minister's Charge* as the "most penetrating criticism of stratified Boston which Howells had yet written" (cxi). George Arms finds in this book a reflection of Howells' "condemnation of Christianity for its inability to face social issues" (274). As Arnold B. Fox remarks perceptively in his "Howells as a Religious Critic," *The Minister's Charge* is the first novel in which Howells "approaches man's duty to man from the religious viewpoint," and Sewell is one of "several examples of ministerial impotence" that Howells presents in a number of his novels (211).² Howells both satirizes and sharply criticizes the minister's inability to cope with social problems.

The common assumptions of the reader may naturally be that Sewell, as the minister of a Boston Protestant church and as a character in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* who provided moral guidance, is able to act as a moral guide for his parishioners and a leader in every way. But the reader comes to find out that Sewell is neither a guide nor a leader. He does not possess strength enough to make himself a force in his church, and on too many occasions, he fails to practice what he preaches in the pulpit. The maxim

that example is better than precept is nonexistent in his thought and action. Therefore, his sermon tends to become a series of fair but empty phrases.

Sewell repeats fatal mistakes with what his wife calls his “recklessness” (3; ch. 1). However, he does not bother to remedy the wrong he does to others with his recklessness. He takes charge of Lemuel Barker, a 20-year-old country boy adrift in Boston, and tries unavailingly to help him solve his social and ethical problems. But Sewell can contribute nothing to the solution of Lemuel’s problems, because he gives help only grudgingly and sporadically.

Sewell becomes acquainted with Lemuel while Mrs. Sewell and he are summer boarders at Willoughby Pastures, a farm village near Boston. There, Sewell praises Lemuel’s poems, although he knows they are badly written, “just to gratify [his] passion for saying pleasant things to people” (3; ch. 1). As a result, Lemuel begins to harbor an ambition to go to Boston and seek a literary career. After his return to Boston, Sewell begins to feel that he has committed a sin by dishonestly praising Lemuel’s bad poems, and giving the boy a false impression that he has a bright future ahead. Presently, Sewell receives a letter from Lemuel proposing to come down to Boston, if Sewell advises, and find a publisher for his poems with Sewell’s assistance. This letter inflicts another wound upon Sewell’s guilty consciousness. Sewell does not deny that he deserves punishment of the sort, but he thinks it very ill-timed. The letter comes on a Saturday morning, “when every minute was precious to him for his sermon” (7; ch. 1), so he compounds his sin by postponing and ultimately failing to answer Lemuel’s letter and discourage his hopes of coming to Boston (Bennett 165).

Lemuel waits patiently for Sewell’s reply, but after a time loses his patience and comes to Boston. The first thing Lemuel does in Boston is to go to see Sewell, who is embarrassed but takes Lemuel in anyway. Lemuel senses that Sewell is not only cold, but is unwilling to help him. Sewell

belatedly discloses the truth, i.e., Lemuel's poems are bad and no publisher would bring out his poems, to Lemuel's great disappointment. Completely shattered, Lemuel runs out of Sewell's home and wanders in Boston. In his deep disappointment at Sewell's change of attitude, he remembers what his mother had said to him before he left Willoughby Pastures: "Mr. Sewell would be mighty different in Boston from what he was that day at Willoughby Pastures" (31; ch. 4). Not knowing exactly what to do, Sewell helplessly watches Lemuel fall into all the snares awaiting a country boy adrift in the big city and go through several bitter experiences.

After stumbling out of Sewell's home, Lemuel goes to sleep on a bench in the Common. Two swindlers have cunningly talked Lemuel into exchanging his two five-dollar bills, all the money he had, with their counterfeit ten-dollar bill at a premium of fifty cents, so he cannot afford to stay in a hotel. Next morning, Lemuel wakes up to find his last fifty cents stolen from his pocket. He pursues the boys he thinks have stolen his money, but is himself arrested by mistake as the thief who had made off with a bag belonging to a shop girl named Statira. He spends his second night in Boston in jail. In this manner, Lemuel suffers a great deal in Boston, which is, in a police officer's words, "a bad place" (68; ch. 7). Sewell and his well-wishing parishioners all consider the boy's problems, but they all give wrong answers. Finally, disillusioned at the painful facts of social inequality in Boston, which he has witnessed as a captive of the police, a guest of a flophouse, a domestic servant, the head-waiter and the general manager at a hotel, and a horse-car conductor, Lemuel goes back to Willoughby Pastures.

III

As was evident in his talk with Silas Lapham, Sewell is quite "puzzled"

about the operation of evil in the moral world and presumably, in his own mind as well. As Fox points out, Sewell at first seems to be approaching the type of ministry of which Howells approves (“Howells as a Religious Critic” 211). He is busily engaged in his parish duties, and intent on acting himself upon the moral principles which he preaches, Sewell lays “so much stress upon duties of all sorts, and so little upon beliefs” (6; ch. 1). In his belief that the mere stress on the Puritan idea of total depravity and unconditional election is an anachronism, Sewell devotes a great deal of his time to meeting and talking personally with people and preaching to them his precepts concerning man’s duty to man. But Sewell is either an ineffectual or a hypocritical minister, because he does not practice his own precepts. Howells believed that real goodness could be tested only in one’s relations with other people. The goodness of character, he thought, revealed itself in “kindness, helpfulness, and thoughtfulness, love of one’s neighbors and forgetfulness of self” (Fryckstedt 221). Evidently, Howells mocks Sewell’s conscious yet somewhat half-hearted effort to help Lemuel’s initiation and success in Boston, and censures organized religion and church on the same ground.

Howells shows sufficient evidence to convince the reader of Sewell’s ineffectuality as a minister. First of all, Sewell possesses an almost tragic flaw of character. Being a weak person, Sewell does not make decisions by himself. In fact, his strong-willed wife dominates him and, as it were, twists her husband round her little finger. She tells her husband what to do and where to go every day. The problem with Mrs. Sewell is that she places duty before charity (319; ch. 32), wishing to be sincere, just and righteous, rather than kind, merciful and humble, in the manner described by Howells in his analysis of the New England character in his *Literature and Life* (281). A second proof of Sewell’s ineffectuality is revealed in his response to the flower charity work conducted by Miss Vane and her niece Sibyl, two of his

society parishioners. Miss Vane and Sibyl have distributed cut flowers among patients in hospitals, prisoners, and the “deserving poor.” Miss Vane says to Sewell: “Don’t you know how much good the flower mission has accomplished among the deserving poor? Hundreds of bouquets are distributed every day. They prevent crime” (24; ch. 3). Presumably, Miss Vane and Sibyl have given flowers to the “homes of virtuous poverty” (24; ch. 3) when bread was asked. Sibyl, an ardent reader of sentimental novels, is the originator of the flower charity. What she wants to get out of the charity work is, Miss Vane tells Sewell, the “sensation of doing good—of seeing and hearing the results of her beneficence” (24; ch. 3). Sewell cynically shows how ridiculous the flower mission is when he says:

I don’t think a single pansy would have an appreciable effect upon a burglar; perhaps a bunch of forget-me-nots might, or a few lilies of the valley carelessly arranged. As to the influence of a graceful little *boutonnière*, in cases of rheumatism or cholera morbus, it might be efficacious; but I can’t really say. (23; ch. 3)

Sewell also tells Miss Vane not to let her niece imagine that the flower charity is more than an innocent amusement: “It would be a sort of hideous mockery of the good we ought to do one another, if there were supposed to be anything more than a kindly thoughtfulness expressed in such a thing” (25; ch. 3). In addition, Sewell is perfectly aware that Miss Vane’s and Sibyl’s attempt to “combine practical piety and picturesque effect” (24; ch. 3) by engaging themselves in the flower charity is whimsical, but he ends his argument against such matter by saying that if Sibyl likes to lose herself in the illusion, “let her get what good she can out of it as an exercise of the sensibilities” (25; ch. 3).

Obviously, Sewell does not believe that the flower charity is a good illustration of the Christian idea of goodness to others. But he has no practicable ideas with which to replace the ladies’ flower charity project, so

he simply lets the ladies go ahead with their work. This instance shows a lack of proper guidance in Sewell's ministry and in his church. Sewell should be able to guide his parishioners more properly, if only he had a few practicable suggestions and the willingness to act with initiative. But as is seen in his dealings with Lemuel Barker, Sewell avoids action. These instances indicate Sewell's inadequacy as a clergyman.

IV

Thus, Howells' criticism of the inadequacy of organized religion as a force in the world is based on his exposure of its hypocrisy: contrary to its claims, it has not done enough to help fellow men. He presents problems of religion and criticizes them. His criticism of religion in turn reveals his own ideas of what religion ought to be. He uses Sewell as his mouthpiece, and this device serves a double purpose. First, by letting the much-afflicted minister Sewell speak ideal precepts, Howells increases the reader's sense of the minister's ineffectuality in contrast. Secondly, Howells provides himself good opportunities to express his own religious opinions without making them sound propagandistic.

By an immediate inspiration from his own mistake of praising Lemuel's bad poems, Sewell writes the first of his three sermons in the novel, "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Proverbs 12.10), in which he teaches how great harm can be done by the "habit of saying what are called kind things." Then, he

showed that this habit arose not from goodness of heart, or from the desire to make others happy, but from the wish to spare one's self the troublesome duty of formulating the truth so that it would perform its heavenly office without wounding those whom it was intended to heal. He warned his hearers that the kind things spoken from this motive were so many sins committed against the

soul of the flatterer and the soul of him they were intended to flatter; they were deceits, lies; and he besought all within the sound of his voice to try to practice with one another an affectionate sincerity, which was compatible not only with the brotherliness of Christianity, but the politeness of the world, and he treated the whole subject with so much fullness and fervour, that he fell into the error of the literary temperament, and almost felt that he had atoned for his wrongdoing by the force with which he portrayed it. (9; ch. 1)

Sewell's sermon thus stands on his own remorse and self-reproach. Mrs. Sewell asks her husband if he thought of Lemuel Barker when he was writing the sermon. Sewell replies gravely that Lemuel was in his mind the whole time (9; ch. 1). Thus, by letting Sewell deliver a fine sermon full of fine precepts, Howells achieves two things: he creates an ironical character who does not practice his precepts, while expressing his own opinions on the human manner and conduct from a religious viewpoint.

What Sewell gets from his meeting with Lemuel is a painful realization that he cannot regard the country boy as a fellow creature. He puts an unbreakable barrier between himself and the boy. A good illustration of this aspect of Sewell's inability is found in the scene of Lemuel's first visit to Sewell's residence. Upon his arrival in Boston, Lemuel visits Sewell, who disappoints the boy by trying to make him go home at once. Lemuel runs away from the minister's home. After he has failed to retain Lemuel, Sewell laments:

If I could only have reached him where he lives, as our slang says! But do what I would, I couldn't find any common ground where we could stand together. We were as unlike as if we were of two different species. I saw that everything I said bewildered him more and more; he couldn't understand me! (29; ch. 3)

And then he blames the world:

Our education is unchristian, our civilization is pagan. They both ought to bring us in closer relation with our fellow-creatures, and

they both only put us more widely apart! Every one of us dwells in an impenetrable solitude! We understand each other a little if our circumstances are similar, but if they are different all our words leave us dumb and unintelligible. (29-30; ch. 3)

Yet the social inequality in stratified Boston, of which Sewell is well aware, does not seem to bother him at all. Lemuel, after a long wandering in Boston, is introduced to Miss Vane by Sewell, and he is employed as her furnace-boy. Miss Vane brings Lemuel to Sewell's church every Sunday, and then Sewell reveals his social prejudice. He asks Miss Vane: "Do you think it's exactly decorous to let your man-servant occupy a seat in your family pew? How do you suppose it looks to the Supreme Being?" (108; ch. 11)

Sewell, however, once again tacitly taking a hint from his own experience, preaches "effort in the erring." In his second sermon "Cease to do evil,"

[Sewell] denounced mere remorse . . . and declared that what is ordinarily distinguished from remorse as repentance was equally a mere corrosion of the spirit unless some attempt at reparation went with it. He maintained that though some mischiefs—perhaps most mischiefs—were irreparable so far as restoring the original status was concerned, yet every mischief was reparable in the good-will and the good deed of its perpetrator. Do what you could to retrieve yourself from error, and then, not leave the rest to Providence, but keep doing. (100; ch. 10)

As before, Sewell's brilliant precepts in his sermon are the byproduct of his effort to atone for his innately-felt sin. To Sewell, Lemuel has become, like Hester Prynne's Pearl, an emblem of sin with an errand as a messenger of anguish. Sewell confesses to Miss Vane: "Since he began to come, I can't keep my eyes off him. I do deliver my sermons at him. I believe I write them at him! He has an eye of terrible and exacting truth. I feel myself on trial before him" (108; ch. 11). Arnold Fox gives a clear-cut account of

Sewell's ministry and his psychology.

[Sewell's] ethics are merely verbal; he is a throwback from the Puritan age, and he is subconsciously attempting to escape from his burden of sin by his emphasis upon duty. This is a negative attitude, and there is very rarely apparent the more positive spirit of love which should motivate an effective religion. In place of this he has only conscience, and it proves inadequate. ("Howells as a Religious Critic," 212)

So there is very much lacking in Sewell's character and his work. The kindly-disposed minister Sewell is officious, but tends to be evasive and categorical. For instance, Lemuel fears the disclosure of his past experiences in jail and associations with vagrants at the Wayfarer's Lodge because that will cost him his managership at a hotel. With the appearance of his ex-mate in the Wayfarer's Lodge, Lemuel is in danger, but has no means to escape it. He is in dire need of somebody's counsel. Finally, he goes to Sewell, and asks him for advice. Sewell does nothing; he evades his responsibility by postponing his action to a later date. Though unwittingly, Sewell fails Lemuel two more times. When Lemuel visits Sewell seeking counsel on his involvement in a love triangle, Sewell acts as if he were being disturbed, so Lemuel leaves the minister's house without confiding in him (302-5; ch. 29). On another occasion, Sewell simply sends his wife downstairs to tell Lemuel at the door that her husband is too busy to see him (319; ch. 32). Sewell violates his own principle of disregarding social distinctions again when he advises Lemuel to marry a girl mentally superior to him, suggesting that it is beneath a man's dignity to lower himself for a "silly girl" who is "degrading and ruinous" (228; ch. 21). But when later Lemuel expresses his intention of marrying Statira, a country girl, Sewell does nothing, although he knows not everything is well with the boy (332; ch. 34).

Ironically, it is Sewell who eloquently expounds the doctrine of Complicity, the idea formulated by Howells, based on Biblical sources and under Swedenborgian and Tolstoyan influence (Fox, "Howells' Doctrine of Complicity" 197; Bennett 169-70). In his last sermon "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them" (Hebrews 13.3), Sewell unabashedly states that only those who have worked for others live usefully, and people should not shrink from such duties.³ With the aid of the ideas supplied by his friend Mr. Evans, editor of the *Saturday Afternoon*, who also befriends Lemuel:

[Sewell] preached the old Christ-humanity to them, and enforced again the lesson that no one for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy, for sickness or health, stood apart from his fellows, but each was bound to the highest and the lowest by ties that centered in the hand of God. No man, he said, sinned or suffered to himself alone; his error and his pain darkened, and afflicted men who never heard of his name. If a community was corrupt, if an age was immoral, it was not because of the vicious, but the virtuous who fancied themselves indifferent spectators. It was not the tyrant who oppressed, it was the wickedness that had made him possible. The Gospel—Christ—God, so far as men had imagined him,—was but a lesson, a type, a witness from everlasting to everlasting of the spiritual unity of man. As we grew in grace, in humanity, in civilization, our recognition of this truth would be transfigured from a duty to a privilege, a joy, a heavenly rapture. Many men might go through life harmlessly without realizing this, perhaps, but sterilely; only those who had had the care of others laid upon them, lived usefully, fruitfully. Let no one shrink from such a burden, or seek to rid himself of it. Rather let him bind it fast upon his neck, and rejoice in it. The wretched, the foolish, the ignorant whom we found at every turn, were something more; they were the messengers of God, sent to tell his secret to any that would hear it. Happy he in whose ears their cry for help was a perpetual voice, for that man, whatever his creed, knew God, and could never forget him. In his responsibility for his weaker brethren he was Godlike, for God was but the impersonation of loving responsibility, of infinite never-ceasing care for us all. (341-42; ch. 35)

This sermon is absurd when delivered by Sewell, whose ethics are merely verbal. But, as Arnold Fox points out, it is an important one when looked at from a different angle. It is the gospel according to Howells and the “first specific statement of the doctrine of complicity” by Howells who “tried to show the shame which society has in each man’s sin” (“Howells’ Doctrine of Complicity,” 197). Howells tells us that Sewell’s sermon on the whole met with great favor. He writes: “Some of the women’s faces showed the traces of tears, and each person had made its application to himself” (342; ch. 35). Critics and newspaper reporters received it warmly and it carried Sewell’s name beyond Boston (340-41; ch. 35).

There is, however, a reverse to the doctrine of Complicity, as Fox points out in his “Howells’ Doctrine of Complicity” (201). It may be that Sewell’s failure is caused by lack of “the spiritual environment in which to work, that his is a voice crying in the wilderness” (Fox, “Howells as a Religious Critic,” 211). To be sure, the urban environment of Boston with its social evils and class consciousness militate against Lemuel’s social and economic rise. But the fact remains that Sewell’s own actions or inactions are constituents of that environment, and the influence of what he has done or failed to do is seen in Lemuel’s misfortune. Sewell’s sin may be somewhat lessened by the share which society must assume in it, but it can never be eliminated (“Doctrine of Complicity” 202). Above all, Sewell has committed sins of omission; he has neglected his charge (Dawes 96).

In view of these factors, Sewell’s last sermon is significant as an illustration of Howells’ religious idea, and more importantly, it deepens the ineffectualness of Sewell’s ministry, as was pointed out above. Howells, in two of his *Century* articles, writes that society would be an image of heaven if people behaved toward one another from motives of real kindness, according to the true teachings of religion, rather than from motives of politeness as they do now (“Who Are Our Brethren?” 935-36; “Equality as

the Basis of Good Society” 63).

VI

In conclusion, Sewell has failed to do what Howells expected of a true religion and its minister. In this account of Sewell’s ministry, then, Howells gives another example of the problem of organized church and religion, as well as the problem of its minister. Howells does not deny that Sewell’s message is valid and effective from the point of view of the church, but he amply shows that Sewell stands condemned by his own measure of conduct. By delineating the insufficiency of a minister, Howells reveals his doubt as to the efficacy of organized religion as a force in life and in the world. Arnold B. Fox ably summarizes the authorial intention in the novel:

The whole structure has been weakened by the custom of giving lip service to creeds that are ignored in everyday life, and in Sewell’s inability to live by his own teachings we seem to have an allegorical statement of the condition of the church. (“Howells as a Religious Critic” 212)

Furthermore, as William Alexander points out in his *William Dean Howells: The Realist as Humanist*, Howells in his criticism of the minister Sewell also implies his own recognition that “with all his [Howells’] personal desire for a sense of ‘complicity’ with men of different and less comfortable circumstances, he has so far failed to achieve it” (60). Like Sewell, the level of his language is not matched by his life. His understanding of this is clearly revealed in a letter to his father dated February 2, 1890, where he writes that he and Mark Twain and their wives are “theoretical socialists, and practical aristocrats,” but that “it is a comfort to be right theoretically, and to be ashamed of one’s self practically” (*Selected Letters* 271). It is clear then that when Howells criticizes the minister Sewell for his

sin and failure, Howells is also criticizing himself for his own inability to step down from Sewell's comfortable upper-middle-class level and live out his philosophy in the real world. Nevertheless, as Alexander also points out, the fact that Howells continues to strive to improve social conditions through his writing amid his own anguished recognition of his personal shortcomings adds depth to his fiction (60).

Notes

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¹For example, Arnold B. Fox, "Howells as a Religious Critic" (cited in this paper); Hanna Graham Belcher, "Howells's Opinions on the Religious Conflicts of His Age as Exhibited in Magazine Articles," *American Literature*, 15 (Nov. 1943), 262-78. See also my paper "The Religious Background of W. D. Howells," *Ryudai Review of Language & Literature*, No. 26 (Dec. 1981), 55-74, for a summary of Howells' religion.

²Other examples are the Venetian priest Don Ippolito in *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), the Congregational minister Julius W. Peck in *Annie Kilburn* (1889), and the evangelistic impostor Joseph Dylks in *The Leatherwood God* (1916). See my paper "William Dean Howells' Criticism of Religion in *The Leatherwood God*," *Ryudai Review of Language & Literature*, No. 27 (Dec. 1982), 41-62.

³In this novel, Howells lets two more of his characters speak for him on the basic idea of Complicity. A Boston horse-car conductor says:

It's a pretty queer kind of a world, anyway, the way everybody's mixed up with everybody else. What's the reason, if a man wants to steal, he can't steal and suffer for it himself, without throwin' the shame and the blame on a lot more people that never thought o' stealin'? (139; ch. 13)

Mr. Evans, editor of the *Saturday Afternoon* and mutual friend of Sewell and Lemuel, discusses the subject with Sewell:

"I want you to tell your people and my people that the one who buys sin or shame, or corruption of any sort, is as guilty as the one who sells it."

"It isn't a new theory," said Sewell. . . . "It was discovered some time ago that this was so before God."

"Well, I've just discovered that it ought to be so before man," said Evans. (178; ch. 17)

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『牧師の責任』におけるハウエルズの宗教批判

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1887年に出版された小説『牧師の責任』はウィリアム・ディーン・ハウエルズの関心が個人的問題から社会的問題へ移行したことを示す最初の作品であり、トルストイの人道主義の影響を反映している。この小説の中でハウエルズは新約聖書の「ヘブル人への手紙」やトルストイによって示された兄弟愛の教えに基づく彼独自の「連帯意識の思想」(the doctrine of Complicity)を主人公 Sewell 牧師の口を借りて展開させている。田舎育ちの Lemuel Barker は Sewell 牧師の過失によりボストンでの文筆活動に対する過大な期待を抱くようになり、ボストンへ出て来て牧師を訪ねるが、牧師は自らの過ちに気付きながら、Lemuel に故郷へ戻るように勧めるため、牧師に裏切られたと思い込んだ Lemuel は牧師宅を飛び出し、大都会の様々な誘惑やわなに翻弄されながら階層化されたボストン社会に対する不満と幻滅を募らせていき、結局は故郷へ戻ることになる。牧師は Lemuel の逆境について良心のとがめを感じ、埋め合わせに自分の教会での説教の中で日々の生活の中ですべての人が兄弟愛を実行するよう熱烈に訴える。このように実行力に欠ける Sewell 牧師に理想的な人の道を説かせることにより、ハウエルズは組織化された宗教の無力さを批判すると同時に「連帯意識の思想」に基づく社会改革の必要性を訴えると言う二つの目的を果たしている。