

## HERBERT S. BIGELOW

Rev. Edward McGlynn was the most celebrated clergyman to acquaint his congregations with the single tax message, but he was not the only one - nor was he the only one to get in hot water over it. In the 1890s a young pastor of Cincinnati's Vine Street Congregational Church so annoyed the moneyed members of his parish that he nearly starved. He saw - and expressed with force and humor - that one cannot call oneself a Christian and yet accept an unjust social order. He was an early Georgist liberation theologian, a direct ancestor of Andelson & Dawsey. Furthermore, Bigelow's delightful sermons, selections of which were published in 1916 by Daniel Kiefer, a prominent Cincinnati single taxer, are buried literary gems. The book was called *The Religion of Revolution*.

The dedication, "To all the unknown and unsuspected heroes of life", is ironically fitting now, because Bigelow's book has lain unnoticed for many years. That is unfortunate, because it is full of a wisdom. Bigelow's style is clear and direct - one is tempted to say strident, except that the uncompromising message is delivered with such wry humility and humor.

Bigelow was born in 1870 in Elkhart, Indiana. He attended Oberlin College and Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. Near the end of his seminary career he received a call from the Vine Street Congregational Church. This parish, writes Mr. Kiefer in the *Single Tax Review* (October 1902), was an average city church whose "financial support was derived from wealthy members of the congregation and whose will was consequently law in the affairs of the church." It had not always been thus; the church was founded by abolitionists back in the 1840s and had been a station of the underground railroad. But after fifty years, the congregation's attitude had listed rightward; "its attitude toward the movement for industrial freedom was one of indifference, if not of hostility."

The new pastor began immediately to preach against complacency, exploitation and political corruption - but the unifying principle that galvanized his sermons came when a Mr. George Von Auer, an active single taxer in the congregation, put a copy of *Progress and Poverty* in Mr. Bigelow's hands. Now that he believed that a coherent, applicable remedy for economic ills was within society's grasp, Bigelow's sermons gained new force, and the discomfiture of his wealthy hearers grew. A move-

ment to get the congregation to dismiss him failed, in large part because Bigelow's message had swelled the church with new members. Kiefer describes what happened next:

"Defeated in their attempts to oust him, the opposing members withdrew their financial support from the church....As the new members were poor and in no way able to contribute the large amounts needed for the support of the institution, for many months the pastor received no salary, and only with the greatest difficulty could the ordinary running expenses of the church be paid. But during all this dark period....the preaching of the gospel of justice continued with unabated vigor."

At the time of the *Single Tax Review* article (1902), Rev. Bigelow was beginning to become involved in Cincinnati politics, starting a campaign with Tom L. Johnson to rescue the local Democratic party from the control of corrupt bosses. He ran for



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secretary of state in that year, and put both his oratorical skills and his enthusiastic following to good use in Johnson's successful campaign for mayor of Cincinnati.

Very little else has been published concerning the life and escapades of Rev. Herbert S. Bigelow, but his legacy is his sermons, which deserve to be remembered and read. The goal of modern liberation theology is to accomplish the saving mission of the church in this world, so that all people may enjoy their right to the fruits of the earth. To accomplish that we need will and courage - but we also need a strategy. Andelson and Dawsey have argued convincingly in 1992 that such a strategy is available in the political economy of Henry George. Rev. Bigelow made the same argument - with skill, and wry wit - back at the turn of the century. ☐

*Destitution with sobriety may be quite as merciless a form of misery than poverty with drunkenness, for a man would be denied even the consolation of the Scripture which said, "Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more."*

*This is the great paradox. Just as the owner of the field can appropriate, in increased rents, the lion's share of the products of machine-assisted labor, so will even sobriety increase rents more than it will increase wages....we have an economic system which enables the owners of the earth to absorb...the advantages of moral as well as material progress. Prohibition may improve the moral character of men, but it cannot touch the economic causes of poverty.*

*There is just as much chance to repeal the law of gravitation by an ordinance of the Cincinnati City Council as to abolish poverty by a prohibition of the liquor traffic.*

*My ideal is not the Jesus of theology. It is the Jesus of history. It is not alone the Jesus of Nazareth. It is a composite personality in whom are merged all the Christs of the centuries.*

*He is the gentleness which has looked with sad eyes on the cruelty of every age....He is the representative sufferer, the representative lover of the world, and men and women, countless millions of them, have stooped to touch the hem of his garment, and have risen in majesty from the dust.*

*He is not alone the Christ of the Christian. He is the Christ of the Jew also. Many have known him by the name of Lao-tse. Many by the name of Buddha divine. Now he is some lonely dreamer of the ghetto. Now a manacled liberator, expiating in chains the tyrannies of men. Again in a garret he toils over his crucibles in search of another God's secrets to be the servitor of man.*

- The Religion of Revolution