



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
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**Unitarianism, Then & Now:  
Why William Ellery Channing's Most Famous Sermon Still Matters 200 Years Later**  
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Around this time each year, I invite us to spend a Sunday reflecting on the *Unitarian* half of our UU heritage. The Unitarian and Universalist movements of which we are a part began centuries before any of us were born, and exploring the stories of our collective past can help explain the present and inform our future.

Today is a particularly auspicious time to reflect on the Unitarian half of our history because today is the 200th anniversary of William Ellery Channing's influential sermon "Unitarian Christianity." It was delivered only about 50 miles east of here at the First Independent Church of Baltimore, known today as First Unitarian. Channing's historic sermon on May 5, 1819 helped catalyze a movement toward claiming the name Unitarian boldly and unapologetically.

To better appreciate why this sermon matters, both then and now, I would like to invite us to zoom out and consider the larger historical context. I've preached a [previous sermon about Channing's life](#), which is available in our sermon archive. So I will focus instead on the ways his sermon was a response to a conflict that began a decade-and-a-half earlier in 1805 with a controversial professorial appointment at Harvard University, and ended thirty years later in 1835. Channing preached his most famous sermon in the middle phase of this larger controversy that spanned a generation.

And there are resonances from this controversy that echo until today. There are significant historical reasons that we UUs have inherited sayings like "We believe in

*deeds* not creeds.” And that, “We don’t have to believe alike to *love alike*.” Both of these slogans highlight our emphasis on *ethics* over dogma. We are a “big tent” movement that does not require our members to subscribe to a particular set of theological doctrines.

But the freedom we enjoy to prioritize *right relationship* over right belief was hard won. In the decades before Channing’s famous sermon, tension had been building for quite some time between the Congregational Christians who were more theologically orthodox and others who were more theologically liberal. The orthodox group tended to stress the importance of authoritative doctrines.

Some of you may have grown up in congregations whose Sunday service included reciting a doctrinal statement like the Nicene Creed or the Apostle’s Creed. Among many Congregationalist Christians at that time, the favored creed was the Westminster Confession of 1646. It detailed beliefs about the Bible, the Trinity, Predestination, the meaning of Jesus’s death, the relationship between church and state, the sacraments, the end of time, and more. The orthodox thought that what really mattered was ensuring that everyone agreed that the Westminster Confession of 1646 was the correct profession of beliefs, whereas the liberals had a much greater tolerance for a diversity of beliefs.

I should also clarify that at that time all of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears understood themselves as Christians, albeit often as theologically liberal Christians. At the time of Channing’s sermon in 1819, we’re still before the Transcendentalist Controversy that began opening us up more to all the world’s religions, before the challenge of Darwin’s evolutionary science, and before the Humanist Controversy that arose in the early twentieth century within our movement.

Channing believed that the commonalities between the liberals and conservatives were more important than their differences. But he was unable to assuage the growing fear among the orthodox that the liberals’s tolerance for diversity would lead them over time to become less recognizably Christian.

Now, here’s the thing: from our perspective two hundred years later, there are many ways in which the orthodox fears were prescient. Although Christianity remains the Fourth of our Six Sources, it has become “one among many sources” instead of

“the one” as it was in Channing’s day. I would add, not that there’s anything wrong with that! But Channing really did think that Unitarianism would always be a *Christian* Unitarianism, significantly different from the pluralistic, multicultural Unitarian Universalism we know today.

In Channing’s day, the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back in the growing tension between liberals and orthodox came in 1805, a decade-and-a-half before his historic sermon. Henry Ware, a theological liberal, was elected to be the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. This tipped the balance at that seminary toward liberalism, and fear arose among the orthodox that the seminarians would form liberal ministers.

As a side note, at UU General Assembly each year, there is a prestigious annual *Ware* Lecture series, which is named after this same family of Wares as Henry Ware, whose appointment launched the Unitarian Controversy. The more you know about our history, the more connection you start to see almost everywhere. So allow me to tell you just a little more.

“Phase one” of this conflict between those early orthodox and liberal Christians spanned about a decade, from 1805 to 1815. During this time, one of the common criticisms directed toward theological liberals was that they were “Unitarians” (as opposed to “Trinitarians.”) On the one hand, that charge was correct: most theological liberals did reject the Trinity as both false, unbiblical, and nonessential to Christianity. On the other hand, the liberals thought that doctrinal emphasis missed the point of what they thought was most important: whether or not you were living an ethical life modeled after Jesus.

And this is where Channing’s sermon “Unitarian Christianity” comes into play. The middle phase of this controversy was from 1815 to 1825, and Channing’s 1819 sermon was almost directly in the middle. He used his sermon to define theological liberalism on its own terms rather than allow it to be defined through the much less charitable accusations of his orthodox detractors.

There’s a whole other important episode that happened in 1818, the year before Channing’s sermon, called the Dedham Decision. This court case led to huge property

battles over whether the liberals or the orthodox retained control over various church buildings across New England. So this conflict was about more than merely ideas.

I will, however, restrain myself from going into much more detail. When I teach UU History at Wesley Theological Seminary, I have a 90-minute lecture with the scintillating title of “American Unitarianism, Origins to 1850: Development & Early Controversies.” So you just got a five minute taste of that. But because this is the 200th anniversary of Channing’s Baltimore Sermon, I want to shift now to be sure to focus us as well on the text of that historic sermon.

I will, however, also be able to cover only a few aspects of Channing’s famous sermon because it weighs in at more than 13,000 words, and took him approximately 90 minutes to preach. (As a point of comparison, my sermons are typically a little more than 2,000 words. My Homiletics professor used to say that, “Sermons should be about something sacred, and about twenty minutes.”)

Then again, Channing did have some idea of what he was doing. If he had preached this sermon on a Sunday morning at his own congregation in Boston, the primary audience would have been the sympathetic members of his own congregation. Instead, he chose to preach it on a Wednesday in Baltimore on the occasion of the ordination sermon of their new minister.

Those of you who attended my Installation here as minister a few years ago—of who have attended similar events in the past—known that occasions such as ordinations and installations mean that neighboring ministers will be in attendance. You may remember the line of ministers processing in.

And Channing was ready for the controversy that he knew would ensue when he preached theological liberalism when orthodox ministers were present. And he had his sermon prepared for publication immediately afterward. Due to the high demand, it went into five editions within the first six weeks. And especially over the next century, many more editions were printed, including in “England, France, Holland, Germany, Hungary, India, and other countries” (Funk 38).

Unsurprisingly, many orthodox colleagues hated the sermon. They described Channing’s words as a “cup of poison,” “in fatal error,” and as “an entirely different religion from that which you believe.” But many hearers and readers open to more

progressive theological views were deeply grateful for Channing's clear, reasoned articulation of what it could mean to be religious in the modern world (39).

Now, I do think that Channing's sermon—all 13,000 plus words of it—is worth revisiting. There's a reason, even today, that one of the requirements to become a UU minister is to read this sermon, along with hundreds of other required readings. At the same time, I don't want to give the impression that Channing's sermon is without problems. Although there is much of value, even on the first page you see evidence of his Christian Supremacy: he thought of Christianity as “the last and most perfect revelation.”

So although those parts of his sermon do not hold up as articles of our Unitarian Universalism tradition today, there are many other parts that were a critical contribution to what is known as the “liberal turn in religion.” Not a turn toward the Democratic Party, but liberal, as in the Latin root *liber*, meaning *free*: a reorientation toward *freedom* in religion. Instead of the orthodox view of believing a doctrine because of hierarchy (a religious leader told you to) or tradition (because it is allegedly what has always been believed), theological liberalism emphasized *reason* and *experience* as sources of authority. And in a world where theological orthodoxy was far more dominant than it is today, it is difficult to overemphasize how powerful it was to have a prominent minister like Channing reassure you that it was ok to trust your *reason* (to be honest about what was a illogical contradiction) and to trust your *experience* (what you knew to be true because you had experienced it firsthand).

I should add that Channing's emphasis was much more on the importance of *reason* in religion. The emphasis on *experience* would be more fully articulated with the next generation of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and others who led the Transcendentalist Revolt within Unitarianism.

Now, some of you grew up theologically liberal, so these ideas may not seem that radical. But I can remember being a college sophomore beginning to seriously question the theologically conservative beliefs I was raised with. And from that perspective, Channing's two hundred year-old words would've been as helpful to me in the late 1990s as they were originally to burgeoning liberals in the early 1800s. In my

own case, it was books such as the Episcopal priest John Shelby Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* that hit me like a bolt of lightning.

But I can equally imagine the power of Channing's words. Bishop Spong was writing in 1999. So how much more important was it in 1819 (180 years earlier) that

- Channing wrote, "Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is that the Bible is a book written for [humanity], in the language of [humanity], and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books" (2).
- He affirmed that "different portions of [the Bible]...refer to the times when they were written...to feelings and usages which have passed away, and without the knowledge of which we are constantly in danger of extending to all times, and places, what was of temporary and local application."
- He went on to detail the logical contradictions in various places in scripture (3).

Many people in his day read these passages and felt affirmed in what they had always suspected. For the first time many people felt permission to free themselves of the contrastive theological garments in which they had been bound.

Before I conclude, allow me as well to briefly tell you the rest of the story about that larger Unitarian controversy that began in 1805 and of which Channing's 1819 sermon was at the midpoint. Channing's bold words helped bring theological liberals closer together, leading six years later to the organization of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

A decade later, historians date the end of that Unitarian Controversy to 1835. And this is one of the points that I find most fascinating: the theological liberals had barely unified and begun developing a clear identity in contrast to the orthodox identity when the liberals began to fracture within themselves. The key moment arrived in 1836 when the former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson published his first book, *Nature*, which helped launch the Transcendentalist revolt within Unitarianism. Their cherished reason had led them in too many cases to become, in Emerson's words, "corpse cold." But that is a story for another day.

Fast-forwarding to our own times, I'll share a final historical resonance. Today the brilliant scholar of religion Karen King is the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. She was the first woman appointed to that position—the oldest endowed chair in the

United States, which is the same named chair to which Henry Ware was appointed in 1805 and which launched the Unitarian controversy in the first place.

Here too part of me wants to confess that the orthodox were not wrong to be worried. Today Dr. Karen King, along with the rest of the faculty at Harvard Divinity School, tend to stir up theological liberalism exactly the way the orthodox feared would happen. But, again, I would add: Good for her and—*Not that there's anything wrong with that!*

And, as ever, the question eventually turns back on each of us. As Channing did in his day, as Karen King and others are doing today, how do you feel led to speak and act to help build the world we dream about?