

# INTRODUCTION TO W. E. CHANNING'S "UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY"

On May 5, 1819, in Baltimore, William Ellery Channing delivered an address entitled "Unitarian Christianity." This speech helped to define the movement that in 1825 created the American Unitarian Association. It was not Channing's purpose to launch a new denomination. His defense of what was then the Unitarian approach to religion was made in response to vicious attacks on Unitarianism by Calvinists and Trinitarians. The word "Unitarian" had been used as a term of contempt, as the word "heretic" is still used in some circles. Channing's speech, as well as other writings, helped to make the name one that Unitarians could adopt for themselves and take pride in.

By the standards of 1819 Channing's religious views were quite radical, although they were the dominant views of the clergy in parts of New England. His emphasis on the goodness of God, the use of reason in understanding the Bible, the centrality of Jesus' moral message, and the tolerance of religious differences among Christians were also characteristic of many leaders of the young American Republic.

By the standards of today's Unitarian Universalism, Channing's theology will sound quite conservative at points. I won't list the conservative features; you will be able to pick them out yourself.

I offer this abridgment of Channing's 1819 speech. It is a link to our increasingly distant beginnings in Protestant Christianity. My version of Channing's speech is less than one third of the length of the original. Besides cutting out whole paragraphs, I have sometimes substituted a word or a phrase from our own time that is equivalent in meaning to the now somewhat odd-sounding words or phrases found in the original text. For the full text of the original, see [William Ellery Channing Center](#).

## UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY

by **William Ellery Channing**

**Delivered in Baltimore on May 5, 1819.**

**Abridged Version Created under the Responsibility of [Dr. Jan Garrett](#)**

1 Thes. v. 21: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

I shall [try to explain] the [methods we use] in interpreting the Scriptures . . . and . . . some of the [teachings] that [they] . . . seem to us clearly to express.

I. We regard the Scriptures as the records of God's . . . revelations to mankind, . . . Whatever [ideas] seem to us to be clearly taught in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve . . . We do not, however, attach equal importance to all the books in this collection. Our religion . . . lies chiefly in the New Testament. . . . whatever [Jesus . . . ] taught, either during his personal ministry, or by his . . . Apostles, we regard as of divine authority . . . This authority, which we give to the Scriptures, is a reason . . . for studying them with peculiar care, and for inquiring . . . into the principles of interpretation . . . by which their . . . meaning may be [determined] . . . Our [primary guideline] in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for [human beings], in [human] language . . . and that its meaning is to be sought in the same [way] as that of other books. . . . God, when he speaks to the human race, [abides by] the established rules of speaking and writing. . . . Now all books, and all conversation, require in the reader or hearer the constant exercise of reason; . . . their . . . [meaning] is only to be obtained by continual comparison and inference. Human language, . . . admits various interpretations; and every word and every sentence must be modified and explained according to the subject which is discussed, according to the purposes, feelings, circumstances, and principles of the writer, and according to the [features] of the language . . . he uses. These are acknowledged principles in the interpretation of human writings . . .

. . . The [Bible] bears the [same] stamp of [God's] hand [as we see in nature]. It has infinite [interconnections]. Every proposition is linked with others, and is to be compared with others; that its full and precise [meaning] may be understood. Nothing stands alone. The New Testament is built on the Old. . . Still more, the Bible treats of subjects on which we receive ideas from other sources

. . . such . . . as the nature, passions, [actions,] and duties of man; and it expects us to [limit] and modify its language by the . . . truths . . . [that] observation and experience furnish . . .

[There is no] book [that] demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible. . . . [I]ts style nowhere [has] the precision of science or the accuracy of definition. Its language is . . . . glowing, bold, and figurative, demanding more frequent departures from the literal sense . . . than that of our own age and country, and [thus] demanding more continu[ous] exercise of judgment. -- We find . . . that [various] portions of this book, instead of being confined to general truths, refer . . . to the times . . . they were written, to states of society, . . . to feelings and [customs] which have passed away, and without the knowledge of which we are . . . in danger of extending to all times, and places, what was of temporary and local [value]. -- We find, too, that some of these books are strongly marked by the [peculiarities] of their . . . writers . . . and that a knowledge of their feelings, and of the [circumstances in] which they were placed, is [required] for understanding their writings. [W]e feel it our . . . duty to exercise our reason upon the Bible. . . . to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known . . . for explaining what is difficult,

and for discovering new truths.

. . . From a variety of possible interpretations, we select that which [fits] the nature of the subject and the state of the writer, . . . the [context] of the passage, . . . the known character and will of God, and . . . the obvious and acknowledged laws of nature. . . . we believe that God never contradicts, in one part of scripture, what he teaches in another; and never contradicts, in revelation, what he teaches [to natural reason] . . . We reason about the Bible precisely as civilians do about the constitution under which we live; [we] . . . are accustomed to limit one provision of that [document] by others, and to fix the precise [meaning] of its parts, by inquiring into its general spirit, into the intentions of its authors, and into the . . . feelings, impressions, and circumstances of the time when it was framed. . . . Deny us this latitude [in reading the Bible], and we must abandon this book to its enemies.

. . . We object . . . to the contemptuous [way] in which . . . reason is often [described] by our adversaries, because it leads, we believe, to universal skepticism. . . . It is [note]worthy how [close] the bigot and the skeptic [are to one another]. Both would [wipe out] our confidence in our faculties, and both throw doubt and confusion over every truth. We honor revelation too highly to make it the antagonist of reason, or to believe that it calls us to renounce our highest powers.

We . . . grant . . . that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we ask any honest man to look back on the history of the church, and say, whether the renunciation of it be not still more dangerous. . . . The true inference from the almost endless errors, which have darkened theology, is, not that we are to neglect and disparage our powers, but to exert them more patiently, [carefully], uprightly. The worst errors, after all, hav[e] sprung up in that church, which [excludes] reason. . . and demands from its members implicit faith. . . . God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. . . . It is the part of wisdom to take revelation as it is given to us, and to interpret it by the help [of reason], which it everywhere supposes, and on which it is founded.

II. I now proceed to . . . state some of the views which we derive from that sacred book....

1. . . . we believe . . . that there is one God, and one only. . . . We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, . . . it subverts in effect . . . the unity of God. According to this doctrine, there are three infinite and equal persons, possessing supreme divinity, called the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Each of these persons, as described by theologians, has his own particular consciousness, will, and perceptions. They love each other, converse with each other, and delight in each other's society. They perform different parts in man's redemption . . . [none] doing the work of the other. The Son is mediator and not the Father. The Father sends the Son, and is not himself sent; nor is he conscious, like the Son, of taking flesh. Here, then, we have three intelligent agents, possessed of different . . . perceptions, performing different acts, and sustaining different relations; and if these things do not imply . . . three minds . . . we are at a loss to know how three minds . . . are to

be formed. . . .

We . . . protest against the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity. "To us," as to the Apostle and the [original] Christians, "there is one God, even the Father." . . . We challenge our opponents to [point out] one passage in the New Testament, where the word God means three persons . . . .

This doctrine, were it true, must, from its difficulty, singularity, and importance, have been laid down with great clearness . . . and stated with all possible precision. But where does this statement appear? From the many passages which treat of God, we ask for one, one only, in which we are told, that he is a threefold being, . . . So entirely do the Scriptures abstain from stating the Trinity, that when our opponents would insert it into their creeds . . . they are compelled to leave the Bible, and to invent forms of words altogether unsanctioned by Scriptural phraseology. . .

We have further objections to this doctrine, drawn from its practical influence. We regard it as unfavorable to devotion, by dividing and distracting the mind in its communion with God. It is a great excellence of the doctrine of God's unity, that it offers to us ONE OBJECT of supreme homage, adoration, and love, One Infinite Father, . . . to whom we may refer all good, . . .

We also think, that the doctrine of the Trinity injures devotion . . . by taking from the Father the supreme affection, . . . and transferring it to the Son. . . . That Jesus Christ, if exalted into the infinite Divinity, should be more interesting than the Father, is precisely what might be expected from history and . . . human nature. Men want an object of worship like themselves, and the great secret of idolatry lies in this [tendency]. A God, clothed in our form, and feeling our wants and sorrows, speaks to our weak nature more strongly, than a Father in heaven, . . . We . . . believe, that the worship of a bleeding, suffering God, tends strongly to absorb the mind and to draw it from other objects, just as the human tenderness of the Virgin Mary has given her so conspicuous a place in the devotions of the [Catholic] Church . . . We believe, too, that this worship, though attractive, is not most fitted to spiritualize the mind, that it [fails to awaken] that deep [love] of the moral perfections of God, which is the essence of piety.

2. [W]e believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. [T]he doctrine of the Trinity, . . . not satisfied with making God three beings, . . . makes Jesus Christ two beings, and [so] introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character. . . .

According to this [view], Jesus Christ, . . . consists of two souls, two minds; the one divine, the other human; the one weak, the other almighty; the one ignorant, the other omniscient. Now we maintain, that this is to make Christ two beings. . . . According to the common doctrine, each of these two minds in Christ has its own consciousness, its own will, its own perceptions. . . . We have always thought that one person was constituted and distinguished by one consciousness. . . .

We believe, then, that Christ is one mind, one being, and, I add, a being distinct from the one God.

. . . [E]xamine the passages in which Jesus is distinguished from God, . . . He is continually spoken of as the Son of God, sent of God, receiving all his powers from God, working miracles because God was with him, . . . and as able of himself to do nothing. . . . [T]he human birth, and bodily form, . . . humble circumstances, and mortal sufferings of Jesus, must all have prepared men to interpret, in the most unqualified manner, the language in which his inferiority to God was declared. Why, then, was this language used so continually . . . if Jesus were the Supreme Deity[?]

3. [I have now stated] our belief on two great points, namely, that there is one God, and that Jesus Christ is a being distinct from, and inferior to, God. [On the next point] we lay still greater stress. We believe in the MORAL PERFECTION OF GOD. We consider no part of theology so important as that which treats of God's moral character; and we value our views of Christianity chiefly as they assert his . . . [admirable] attributes.

It may be said that [on this subject] . . . all Christians agree, that all ascribe to the Supreme Being infinite justice, goodness, and holiness. [But] it is very possible to speak of God magnificently, and to think of him meanly; . . . We cannot judge of men's real ideas of God by their general language, for in all ages they have hoped to soothe the Deity by [praising him] . . . .

. . . Christians have generally leaned towards a very injurious view of the Supreme Being. They have too often felt . . . as if he were raised . . . above the principles of morality, above those eternal laws of [fairness and justice] to which all other beings are subjected. We believe . . . that in no being is the sense of right so strong . . . as in God. We believe that his almighty power is entirely [in accord with] his perceptions of justice; and this is the ground of our piety. It is not because he is our Creator merely, but because he created us for good . . . purposes; it is . . . because his will is the perfection of virtue . . . that we pay him allegiance. We cannot bow before a being . . . who governs tyrannically. . . . We [love] not the loftiness of God's throne, but the [justice] and goodness in which it is established.

We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, . . . good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system.

We believe, too, that God is just; but we never forget, that his justice . . . dwell[s] in the same mind, and [acts] in harmony, with perfect benevolence. . . . God's justice has for its [goal] the highest virtue of the creation, and it punishes for this end alone, and thus it coincides with benevolence; for virtue and happiness . . . are inseparably conjoined.

God's justice . . . appears to us to be in perfect harmony with his mercy. . . . By God's mercy, we understand not a blind . . . compassion, which forgives . . . without regard to the interests of virtue.

. . . God's mercy . . . desires strongly the happiness of the guilty, but only through their [reform]. It has a regard to character as truly as his justice. It defers punishment, and suffers long, that the sinner may return to his duty, . . .

To give our views of God in one word, we believe in his Parental character. . . . We believe that he has a [parent's] concern for his creatures, a [parent's] desire for their improvement, a [parent's] fairness in proportioning his commands to their powers, a [parent's] joy in their progress, a [parent's] readiness to receive the [one who tries to do better], and a [parent's] justice for [one who refuses to change his ways]. We look upon this world as a place of education, in which he is training [us] by prosperity and adversity, . . . by conflicts of reason and passion, . . . by a . . . discipline suited to free and moral beings, for union with himself, and for a sublime and ever-growing virtue in heaven.

Now, to the systems of religion which prevail among us, [we object] that they are [contrary] . . . to these honorable views of God; that they take from us our [Parent] in heaven, and substitute for him a being . . . whom we cannot love if we would . . . and whom we ought not to love if we could. We object [especially to . . . Calvinism] now . . . propagated through our country. . . . It casts dishonor on the Creator. . . . and teaches that God brings us into life wholly depraved, so that under the innocent features of our childhood is hidden a nature [opposed] to all good and [inclined] to all evil, a nature which exposes us to God's [anger] even before we have [become able] to understand our duties or to reflect upon our actions. [In one version] . . . it teaches that the offence of the child, who brings into life this ceaseless tendency to unmingled crime, exposes him to the sentence of everlasting damnation. Now . . . we maintain that [if a being were by nature] unfailingly dispos[ed] to evil and to evil alone, [that fact] . . . would absolve it from guilt; . . . that to punish the sin of this unhappily constituted child with endless ruin, would be a wrong unparalleled by the most merciless despotism.

This [orthodox Christian] system also teaches . . . that God selects from this corrupt mass a number to be saved, and plucks them, . . . from the common ruin; that the rest of [humanity] . . . are commanded to repent . . . and that forgiveness is promised them, on terms which their very [nature] infallibly disposes them to reject, and in rejecting which they [horribly magnify their punishments in] hell. . . .

[Such] false and dishonorable views of God, . . . we feel ourselves bound to resist . . . [W]e ask our opponents to leave to us a God worthy of our love and trust, . . . Reproached as we often are, . . . it is our consolation . . . that one of our chief offences is the zeal with which we [defend] the dishonored goodness and [fairness] of God.

4. . . . I now proceed to give our views of the mediation of Christ, . . . We believe, that he was sent by the Father to [bring about] a moral, or spiritual deliverance of mankind; that is, to rescue men from sin and its consequences, and to bring them to a state of everlasting purity and happiness. We believe, too, that he accomplishes this . . . purpose by a variety of methods; by his

instructions respecting God's unity, parental character, and moral government, . . . by his promises of pardon to the penitent, and of divine assistance to those who labor for progress in moral excellence; by the light which he has thrown on the path of duty; by his own spotless example . . . by his glorious discoveries of immortality; by his sufferings and death; by . . . the resurrection, which powerfully bore witness to his divine mission . . .

. . . [Although] we differ [among ourselves] in explaining the connexion between Christ's death and human forgiveness, . . . we agree in rejecting many [notions] which prevail in regard to his mediation. The idea . . . that Christ's death has an influence in making God . . . merciful, in awakening his kindness towards men, we [totally] reject . . .

We believe, too, that this system is unfavorable to the character. It . . . leads men to think that Christ came to change God's mind rather than their own; that the highest object of his mission was to [fend off] punishment rather than to communicate holiness; and that a large part of religion consists in disparaging good works and human virtue [so as to magnify] the value of Christ's . . . sufferings. . . . For ourselves, we have not so learned Jesus. . . . We regard him as a Saviour, chiefly as he is the light, physician, and guide of the dark, diseased, and wandering mind. . . . Why pluck the sinner from hell if a hell be left to burn in[side him]? Why raise him to heaven if he remain a stranger to its sanctity and love?. . . [W]e believe, that faith in this religion is of no worth, and contributes nothing to salvation, [unless] it uses these [teachings,] precepts, promises, and the whole life, character, sufferings, and triumphs of Jesus, as the means of purifying the mind, of changing it into the likeness of his . . . excellence.

5. . . . We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, . . . in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience. We believe that these moral faculties are the grounds of responsibility . . . and that no act is praiseworthy [unless] it springs from their exertion. We believe . . . that no dispositions infused into us without our own moral activity. . . . are [worthy of admiration] . . . [Thus] . . . We object . . . to the idea of many Christians respecting [human] impotence and God's irresistible [action] on the heart, believing that they subvert our responsibility . . . , that they make [human beings] machines, that they cast on God the blame of all evil deeds, that they discourage good minds, and inflate the fanatical . . .

Among the virtues, we give the first place to the love of God. . . . But . . . we believe that great care is necessary to distinguish it from counterfeits. [Much that] is called piety [today he would say "spirituality"] is worthless. Many have fallen into the error, that there can be no excess in feelings which have God for their object; and. . . they have abandoned themselves to extravagances which have brought contempt on piety. . . . [I]f the love of God be that which often bears its name, the less we have of it the better. If religion be the shipwreck of understanding, we cannot keep too far from it. . . . We cannot sacrifice our reason to the reputation of zeal. We owe it to truth and religion to maintain that fanaticism, partial insanity, sudden impressions, and ungovernable [emotion], are anything rather than piety.

. . . The true love of God is a moral sentiment . . . consisting in [love for] his moral perfections. . . . We [regard those and only those as] pious . . . who . . . conform [in practice] to God's moral perfections . . . ; who show [their] delight in God's benevolence, by loving and serving [their] neighbor[s]; [their] delight in God's justice, by being resolutely upright; . . . whose conversation, business, and domestic life are swayed by a regard to God's presence and authority. In all things else men may deceive themselves. Disordered nerves may give them strange sights, and sounds, and impressions. Texts of Scripture may come to them as from Heaven. Their whole souls may be moved, and their confidence in God's favor be undoubting. But in all this there is no religion. The question is, Do they love God's commands, in which his character is fully expressed . . . ? Without this, ecstasy is a mockery. . . . We do not judge of the bent of men's minds by their raptures, any more than we judge of the natural direction of a tree during a storm. . . .

. . . We honor . . . true religious sensibility. We believe, that [religion] is intended to act powerfully on our whole nature, on the heart as well as the understanding and the conscience. . . . But . . . [w]e honor religion too much to give its sacred name to a feverish, forced, fluctuating zeal, which has little power over the life.

I need not express to you our views on the subject of the benevolent virtues. . . . but there is one branch of benevolence . . . I ought not to pass over in silence, . . . I refer to the duty of . . . charitable judgment, especially towards those who differ in religious opinion. We think, that in nothing have Christians so widely departed from their religion, as in this particular. . . . An enemy to every religion, if asked to describe a Christian, would, with some show of reason, depict him as an idolater of his own . . . opinions, . . . shutting his eyes on the virtues, and his ears on the arguments . . . of his opponents, arrogating . . . all saving power to his own creed, sheltering under the name of pious zeal the love of domination . . . and the spirit of intolerance, and trampling on men's rights under the pretense of saving their souls.

We can hardly conceive of a [clearer duty] on beings of our . . . fallible nature . . . than to abstain from condemning [people] of apparent conscientiousness and sincerity, who [can be charged] with no crime but that of differing from us in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and differing, too, on topics of great and acknowledged obscurity. . . .

. . . We find, that on no subject have men, and even good men, [attached] so many strange conceits, wild theories, and fictions of fancy, as on religion ; and remembering, as we do, that we ourselves [share in] the common [weakness], we dare not assume infallibility in the treatment of our fellow-Christians . . .

We [Unitarians] have embraced [our positions] not hastily or lightly, but after much deliberation; and we hold [them] fast, not merely because we believe [them] to be true, but because we regard [them] as purifying truth, as a teaching according to godliness, as able to "work mightily" and to "bring forth fruit" in them who believe. That we wish to spread it, we have no desire to conceal; but . . . we wish its diffusion. . . because we regard it as more friendly to practical piety and pure

morals than the opposite doctrines . . . because it recommends religion at once to the understanding and the heart  
. . . because it tends to restore the benevolent spirit of Jesus to his divided and afflicted church . . .

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