

The Next Step for Our Unitarian Churches

Earl C. Davis

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This portion of the Conference program arose out of the considerations of a Committee on Publicity, so-called, to which Mr. Savage and I were appointed among others. As we worked over the problem, two or three ideas came to the surface as of primary importance. In such unstable times as the present, we felt that we ought to consider, in the light of our past, and in view of current trends, what our assets are and what our main purpose ought to be. Then we feel that we ought to consider the methods we may make use of in attempting to attain our purposes.

My share in this program, quite accidentally, is to state what our main assets are, and what our main purpose ought to be. I am not forgetting our secondary assets in the form of organizations, churches, funds, adherents, and momentum, but by primary assets I mean those fundamental principles, those intellectual methods, those high purposes which have created our secondary assets, and, may I add, will continue to be as they have been in the past, the assurance of our success as we press on in our work.

It is quite the fashion at the moment to poke fun at religion; to belittle the churches and their influence; and especially to speak of the Puritan and of Puritan New England with a sneer. I regret to record that many who enjoy, and frequently abuse the freedom won for them by sturdy ancestors, join in this chorus of ridicule. Let them hang their heads in shame as they thus betray not alone their shallowness, but their ignorance.

¹ I have yet to identify the conference where Earl Davis gave this paper. From the text, it is clearly after 1933, with the arrival of the Roosevelt Administration and after Hoover's Administration. Talk of Roosevelt's "brain trust" suggests that this took place in 1933 or 1934.

For the moment let us remind ourselves of one or two facts and factors in the background out of which we have come. The migration of both the Pilgrim and the Puritan to the shores of this New World was not merely a change in physical environment, but, quite as much, was it the registration of a change in social, political, intellectual, and spiritual outlook. In that change, certainly one of the most momentous in a thousand years, we find the leadership in the hands of men of intellectual acumen and moral courage, men of fiber and virility. Let it be recalled that, while our political independence from the old world regime was delayed until 1776, the Pilgrims of Plymouth severed their connection with the "Historic Episcopate" in 1606 at Scrooby; and the Puritans of Salem, on that July day when three or four laymen laid their hands upon Francis Higginson and Samuel Skelton, and ordained them preacher and teacher respectively of the Congregationally ordered Church at Salem, they were breaking with a Christian practice and tradition that had held sway in our western world for at least 1400 years. The Congregational Order was then and there started on its career. It was an event of the first magnitude.

But on that very day too there were born in Salem the two parties, later to be known as Orthodox and Liberal, around whose conflicts the history of religion in New England has been written, even to our own day. The conservative Orthodox party relied primarily upon the secondary assets of society, the institutions, the traditions, the conventions, the created and passing products of the spirit. They did not wish to break with the Historic Episcopate, but wanted to reform it, and remain within its pale, subject to its authority.

But also on that day in Salem there were men of the quality and spirit that would have responded to the challenge that Emerson, two hundred years later, was to hurl at the ministers assembled under the roof of the Harvard Divinity School, "Cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."² In so far as we have that quality and capacity today, we may trace our Unitarian primary assets back to the day when the Salem Church cut loose from the "Historic Episcopate," cast behind it all conformity to deal at first hand with reality.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, Address delivered before the Senior Class in Harvard's Divinity School, July 15, 1838.

We must not forget that first century of struggle when the orthodox laity tried to get a strangle hold on the liberties of the churches and their ministers. Nor must we forget that staunch leader of the liberals of the 17th century, John Wise of Ipswich, who, with his parishioners, offered the first resistance to Governor Andros' tax collection efforts. His "Vindication of the Government of New England Churches" (1710) is as racy reading as one can ask for, and in 1772 was republished by the Revolutionary party and used as a propaganda pamphlet for the Revolution. Read it. It breathes the very spirit of what he calls "the natural freedom of human beings;" and consider this remarkable utterance made about 1700,

Right reason, that great oracle of human affairs is the soul of man so formed and endowed by creation, with a certain sagacity or acumen (in many particular examples sharpened by the constitution of nature, by grace and study) whereby man's intellect is enabled to take up the true idea or perception of things agreeable with, and according to their natures.³

It would be well for us to remember as we look back upon the past out of which we have come that there was something sublime and majestic about that sturdy crowd that left the old world behind, cut free from the Historic Episcopate, built a new civilization out of the wilderness; laid the foundations of a new nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal."⁴ At least as we criticize their shortcomings, and point out their limitations, we must have the grace to recognize that the very liberty that permits us to criticize them is a gift from their labor and fidelity. Just how far we, with our luxury-loving softness, would be willing to follow such as they were in their time, is probably the final answer to the question that is in our minds today.

But out of these two centuries of pioneering hardship, there emerged, dominated by a growing passion for freedom, and, as witnessed by the schools and colleges established, a growing faith in education and enlightenment, two important facts, one, the new government, the new nation, and the other, the practice of a religious fellowship based on freedom. The growing strength

³ John Wise, *The Churches Quarrel Espoused*, initially published in 1710, republished 1772, Boston: John Boyles, p. 32.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.

of the Liberal Party in the 18th century, culminating in the split in the Congregational Order in the early years of the 19th century, brings us almost to our immediate background. It is fair to say, I think, that the history of the 19th century in America cannot be written without including the intellectual and spiritual contribution of the Unitarian fellowship. Its followers were largely the trailblazers of the century.

In view of that fact I want to stop for a moment to recall just what were regarded as the primary assets as viewed by the leaders of this Liberal Party to be known as Unitarian. Channing said, "There are times when the assertion of great principles is the best service a man can render society."⁵ As he prepared the introductory remarks for his published works he emphasized the point that his writings would be marked by two main characteristics: first by the high estimate which they express for human nature, its achievements, its capacities and its possibilities. The human soul, "is an immortal germ, which may be said to contain now within itself what endless ages are to unfold."⁶ Second, and an outgrowth of the first,

I proceed to another sentiment, which is expressed so habitually in these writings as to constitute one of their characteristics, and which is intimately connected with the preceding topic. It is reverence for liberty, for human rights; a sentiment which has grown with my growth, which is striking deeper root in my age, which seems to me a chief element of true love for mankind, and which alone fits a man for intercourse with his fellow creatures. I have lost no occasion for expressing my deep attachment to liberty in all its forms, civil, political, religious, to liberty of thought, speech, and the press, and of giving utterance to my abhorrence of all the forms of oppression.⁷

⁵ William Ellery Channing, "Slavery," In *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge, 1884, p. 489, originally published in November 1835.

⁶ William Ellery Channing, "Introductory Remarks," In *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge, 1884, p. 57, originally published in November 1841.

⁷ William Ellery Channing, "Introductory Remarks," In *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge, 1884, p. 61, originally published in November 1841.

Nor was this just a phrase with him. It was the working principle of his public and private life. Whatever he believed in matters of religion, he believed after he had subjected them to every test of investigation and reason. "To gain truth," he says,

which is the great object of the understanding, I must seek it disinterestedly. Here is the first and grand condition of intellectual progress. I must choose to receive the truth, no matter how it bears on myself. I must follow it, no matter where it leads, what interests it opposes, to what persecution or loss it lays me open, from what party it severs me or to what party it allies.⁸

It was his fidelity to this principle that led to the rupture of the Congregational order.

While the Unitarians of the 19th century were not all Channings, nor did they all embody his principles to the fullness of their possibilities, yet there were some great laymen and strong ministers. They left their imprint on the age in which they lived. They were men of integrity, intellectual power, strong character, men of courage and high purpose.

They faced the crises of their time with buoyant faith, and hard labor. They maintained their faith in the principle of Freedom, and turned not back to the "Historic Episcopate." There was the slavery issue; there was the adjustment to the discoveries of science, the doctrine of evolution, and what in our time, we call "the social question." On the whole, they came through the ordeal of the 19th century with honor, and passed on to us the lighted torch of religious freedom; and the faith that within the human soul are the possibilities that the ages are to unfold.

[Inserted in handwriting here:] Brief summary of principles?

Then came 1914, and what has followed since the tom-toms began to beat. Volumes have been written to explain, describe, and interpret. There is no point in rehearsing the tale, except

⁸ William Ellery Channing, "Self-Culture," In *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge, 1884, p. 67, originally published in November 1838.

perhaps to note that we have been on an international debauch, and that we wake up only to find that we have dissipated much of our wealth; we have done many foolish things that we [would] rather forget, but cannot, and we have done some things that we do not mention in public. We followed the old patterns that men have always followed when the tom-toms beat. The results also have followed old patterns. We use the words, "humanity uprooted," "breakdown of standards," "the crumbling of frail human nature under stress of emotion," "the new age," "new moral experiments," and hundreds of others. As a whole, we rather lost our nerve, and while we are not yet over the jitters, we are, I believe, beginning to see that we have been on a drunk, and must pay the price of our folly. That is hopeful.

One other thing is hopeful. Amid all the social and political shiftings from right to left, and left to right, and back again, we must not overlook the fact that the little old method of investigation and discovery, the method of the scientist, the method of freedom of thought, the method which we have been trying to apply to the problems of religion lo these 800 years, has been slowly, but irresistibly finding its way into the very forefront of all the great political, industrial, and social problems with which we are faced. The great two-volume survey under President Hoover's Administration, "Social Trends,"⁹ is witness to what I have said. The so-called "brain trust" of the present administration is but a continuation of that very idea. That is the one constructive idea that has found, and will continue more-and-more to find, its way into the political and social thought and practice. There may be spasms for and dictators little and big, right, left, or in the middle, but the method of freedom, investigation, and discovery is to have its day.

So, too, in the field of religion. There will be hoards who, for various and sundry reasons, mostly because of the jitters, will turn their face back towards the Historic Episcopate; there will be, as there have been, plenty of wild and untutored persons who will follow strange and new religious leaders, Aimee

⁹ *Recent Social Trends in the United States: Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends, 1934.*

Semple Macpherson,¹⁰ The Buchmanites,¹¹ or whatever they are called are current illustrations.

But the fact remains that however hungry people may be for spiritual satisfaction, we must conclude that all the literature, as well as the practical boycott of institutional religion by hordes of people, indicate that the old pastures are no longer acceptable feeding grounds. Van Wyke Brooks says that, one day while returning from Church with his father after having listened to a powerful Calvinistic sermon by Dr. Hopkins, a boy named Channing suddenly began to whistle. That whistle spelled the end of Calvinism, says Brooks, if people had only known it. "Thumbs down," said the youthful Channing. Thumbs down, we are saying in our time, upon the whole of system of Revelation-Authority-and Obedience. That has had its day. Freedom, fellowship and integrity, that system and method, in the world of religion, is to have its day. It has been a faithful and reliable guide in our journey from the strong-walled city of the middle ages. That method of freedom and fellowship, and integrity now faces the test as to whether we can call our kind the world over, [whether we] can develop a constructive religious life in the soil of the modern world.

The task is not easy. There are hazards, pitfalls and dangers. But the age seems to say to our time, "Cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."

But here is the story. Where does it land us? I said a while ago that the scientist, as he sits in his laboratory, takes it for granted that the world he is studying behaves according to some process that he can discover, and that he himself has some ability to make that discovery, to learn what is going on about him. Everything that he does seems to tell him that he is right. His results and labors confirm the wisdom of that attitude. The returns are not all in. We have learned something by our method

¹⁰ Aimee Elizabeth Semple McPherson, nee Kennedy (1890-1944) was a Canadian Pentecostal evangelist famous for founding the Foursquare Church in 1923 and using broadcast mass media for wider dissemination of religious services and appeals for donations.

¹¹ The Buchmanites, also known as "The Oxford Group," was a Christian organization founded by Frank Buchman (1878-1961) in 1921. In 2001 the movement was renamed Initiatives of Change.

of discovery, enough to indicate that that is the kind of a world that we live in, and that we are made to discover its secrets. We are on the right road. "Ask and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."¹² So the great quest is on. Prove all things. Hold fast to that which is proved.

But here is the rub. Some things seem to me proved, to be true; others seem probable; and still others just possibilities. Just how far each one of us, or generation, may go in accepting some things as proved, and other things as possibilities depends on many factors. But from the point of view of religion, it is right here in this process of discovery that we come upon the quest for God, and the story of the evolution of beliefs about God. Always they are our attempts to answer the question that comes pounding in upon our inquiring minds from all parts of time and space. The universe seems to be saying to us all the time, "Tell me, O man, have you discovered completely my secret? Do you know my inmost character? Do you know how I behave and why? Do you find the reason for my being and yours? Do you detect the presence of purpose in me? Can you tell me, O Man, why that strange feeling of awe and reverence steals over when you look forth from [a] quiet corner upon the night of the circling planets singing on their way? Can you tell me why the shivers run through your nervous system, and your life voice to cheer as one man lays down his life for another?"

When the world has asked me these questions I am not disturbed if I meet someone who is too cautious to carry his certainties as far as I do, or who questions the possible answers that I think may be forthcoming from our great adventure of living. Nor am I disturbed if I cannot go as far as my neighbor. Our differences are not the occasion for a quarrel, the breaking of fellowship, but the occasion for a closer and more painstaking quest together. I stake my life on these two things, that we live in a world of integrity, that there is an answer to the questions that the world asks us, and that we ask of the world; and second, that in freedom and fellowship we make our way in the great adventure. They are the root and foundation of all faith and living.

¹² Matthew 7:7.

But all that is too vague, you say. It is not concrete or definite enough for this age. What are you going to do about those concrete things that you call secondary assets: the concrete beliefs, the traditions, the customs, the individual churches, the associations, the funds? My answer is that they are just the concrete and definite finite realities in which this faith, attitude, and method that I have spoken of above must work, and must express itself. In these days of uprooted persons, and uprooted institutions, of casualness and looseness of conduct, of uncertainty, I know of no greater asset than the presence of a person who takes life on a high plane, who, even though he may never make public declaration, displays by his life that he has secretly pledged his life to the highest goal of love and honor and truth, one who moves among his fellows, neither slave nor domineering master, whose word is as good as his bond, and whose bond is backed by real assets. How we look for such in troubled times? How inquiring youth seeks among us in search of just those qualities, self-respect, respect for another, and integrity.

When such people join themselves together in churches, there the spirit of the living God broods; there man meets man at his best; there is life and inspirations; there is vitality, purpose. Fortunate is the community that nurtures within its confines just such a fellowship, that may and does hold high the standard of freedom, fellowship, and integrity. Fortunate the nation that has such groups scattered through its extent. Fortunate the youth that grows up in such a midst. That we may have in our midst such persons, that we may maintain that high standard in our churches and societies, and carry its spirit through the life and activities of our organizations, into the pulsating restless life of today, and then into the tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, that is our reasonable service. Fidelity to those high standards in the concrete realities of living is a reasonable attempt on our part to pay a small portion of the debt which we owe to the past, and the obligation that we owe to the future.

Thus far this principle has brought us out of the strange and tumultuous past, creating, modifying and discarding, leaving behind those things that are transitory, and holding to the elements that are permanent. To its faithful operation in our hands let us commend ourselves. The task is not easy; the dangers of liberty are not to be overlooked. The current

tendency toward dictatorship and authority both in government and religion are in part a reaction against the abuses of freedom. It has been so easy to take all the immediate advantages that freedom offers, and forget all the obligations that are involved. It is not an irresponsible freedom from authority to which we are called. Far from it. It is a freedom for truth, for investigation, for discovery, and above all for unfailing integrity.

One of the astonishing facts concerning the events of the past few years has been the lack of knowledge, the lack of wisdom, the lack of insight displayed by men in high places, as well as men in ordinary pursuits. How dismayed we have been to discover men in positions of trust acting with a duplicity and a lack of integrity that has amounted to moral turpitude. Abigail Adams charged her husband, John Adams, as he was carrying the heavy burden of the Revolutionary days, "Take as good care of yourself as is consistent with your public duties."¹³ That was true freedom. It is a wise and disinterested, responsible freedom that the age demands of men. This is not a hundred yard dash that we are facing in our present day, speedy though we may think ourselves. It is a long journey, a century long. Wisdom, knowledge, and patience.

But one more quality, Oh, above all else! Integrity. Channing could whistle at Samuel Hopkins' doctrines, and turn thumbs down on Calvinism, but out of the absolute honesty, courage, and integrity that he detected in the person of Hopkins, he reconstructed his thought of an age, and brought forth principles that are timeless.

This, then, as I see it, is the next step for our Unitarian Churches. As the Puritans at Salem left behind them the Historic Episcopate, and trusted to the new Order, as Channing and his day left behind them Calvinism, and followed truth in the fellowship of freedom, so may we leave behind the last vestige of that system, revelation, authority, and obedience, and trust the light of the torch held out for us to grasp and carry forward. Investigation, discovery, and integrity. Would that we, as individuals, might become so saturated with the spirit of discovery, investigation and integrity, that every last one of

¹³ Perhaps notably this is quoted in *The Unitarian Register*, Volume 112, page 150, 1933.

our churches, our institutions, our organizations, might glow with the light and power that shall discover the answers that a disillusioned age is asking. That is not alone our next step. It is our long journey.

I would rather work in stubborn rock
All the years of my life;
And make one strong thing
And set it in a high clean place,
To recall the granite strength of my desire.
Jean Untermeyer¹⁴

¹⁴ Jean Starr Untermeyer (1886-1970) American poet. This poem is the first poem from her first book of poetry, *Growing Pains*, published in 1918.