

**WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING, “UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY,” BALTIMORE, MD
(5 MAY 1819)**

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Abstract: Officially, Boston’s venerable Rev. William Ellery Channing traveled to Maryland in May of 1819 to deliver a sermon at the ordination ceremony of Jared Sparks, a promising young preacher. Unofficially, Channing went to the First Independent Church of Baltimore to deliver the definitive statement of American Unitarianism, formally melding New England Christian liberalism with the English Unitarian tradition and carrying their unified influence south. Attended by a distinguished cast of supporters and prepared for immediate publication, Channing’s address marked an important development in American religious history. A confident and articulate theological treatise, it asserted the vitality of religious liberty, inspired a generation of liberal Christians and free thinkers, and so prepared the way for American Transcendentalism.

Keywords: William Ellery Channing, Unitarianism, Liberalism, Liberty

Later in life, the Rev. William Ellery Channing would trace his spiritual awakening to a moment in childhood when his father took him to hear a sermon. It was an address of “the revival kind,” he recalled, an example of the fire-and-brimstone oratory common to the New England of the late eighteenth century.¹ Indeed, “the preacher made such a terrific picture of the lost condition of the human race rushing into hell,” he said, “that it filled my imagination with horror.” The speaker “besought his hearers to flee from the wrath to come into the arms of Jesus, who was described as wounded and bleeding at the hand of the inexorable God, who exacted from him the uttermost penalty due to a world of sinners.” Afterward, Channing reflected on the message with a mix of terror and skepticism. As he climbed into the carriage for the return ride home, he heard his father comment favorably to a friend: “Sound doctrine, that! Leaves no rag of self-righteousness to wrap the sinner in!” And yet, though the son waited expectantly for a debriefing, the elder Channing had already directed his thoughts elsewhere. Unshaken, he drove home whistling, and retired after dinner to his pipe, his newspaper, and a chair by the fire. From that day forward, the young Channing would discern a certain discordance between spoken word and lived belief. In biographer Jack Mendelsohn’s words, he recognized “the necessity of withholding judgment upon what people say until one is able to divine by their actions what they *mean*.”²

Throughout his life, Channing remained committed to a unity of thought, speech, and action. An early champion of Christian liberalism in America, he followed his God-given reason wherever it led, insisting upon the right of others to do the same, regardless of the prevailing doctrines and creeds.³ In adulthood, he would become one of the nation’s foremost religious orators, asserting a right of religious liberty against the overbearing and intolerant Calvinist establishment. Though small in stature and persistently sickly, Channing’s brilliant mind and rhetorical skill allowed him to rise above his physical limits. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his famous sermon on “Unitarian Christianity,” delivered on May 5, 1819, at the First Independent Church of Baltimore.

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This essay proposes to situate “Unitarian Christianity” within its historical context in order to understand its import, both for its moment and for the broader trajectory of American religion. It does so by considering, first, the outline of Channing’s life leading up to the speech; second, the religious discourses framing its exigency and portending its content; and third, the text of the speech itself. Together, these emphases disclose the centrality of Channing’s address within the important religious, literary, and political currents of his day. A patient and devastating counter to years of Calvinist hectoring, the sermon claimed space for free thought and expression within the Christian fold, emboldening liberal allies and motivating the generation of thinkers, writers, and reformers who would reshape New England in the decades to come.

Channing’s Biography

William Ellery Channing was born April 7, 1780, in Newport, Rhode Island. It was a fitting birthplace for the great preacher, biographer John W. Chadwick observes, since the land had long been dedicated “to those principles of religious liberty which were the most animating principles of his life.”⁴ His father, William Channing, began practicing law in Newport in 1771, and married Lucy Ellery in 1773. The couple went on to have ten children, nine of whom survived to adulthood, and the third of whom would one day be famous in ministry. Though attentive and loving in a stern way, Channing’s parents were not particularly affectionate and his early years not especially pleasant. Indeed, he “said repeatedly that his childhood was the least happy period of his life, and that, as he had grown older, each year had been happier than the last.” This Chadwick attributes to the parents’ “stony formalism”—their belief that a child “should be seen and not heard, and that he should know his place.”⁵ A similar atmosphere prevailed in both the chapel and the schoolroom, leaving a sensitive boy with few sources of affection. It is perhaps not an overreach to identify in these early experiences the origin of Channing’s adult temperament and views.⁶

On Sundays, Channing had access by turns to the famous sermons of Dr. Samuel Hopkins and Dr. Ezra Stiles, each a close family friend and regular household guest. Though theological rivals, both Hopkins and Stiles were recognized for their personal kindness, and were allied in their public opposition to slavery. To Hopkins, Channing would later attribute both his awakening to the evils of the peculiar institution and his deep-seated aversion to strong Calvinism. To Stiles, by then president of Yale College, he would attribute “the indignation which I feel towards every invasion of human rights,” adding that, from his earliest years, he had “regarded no human being with equal reverence.”⁷ In 1792, at the age of twelve, Channing moved to New London, Connecticut to live with his uncle Henry—also a preacher—and to prepare for admission to Harvard. When his father died in 1793, he joined his elder brother in assuming the burden of a provider. In 1794, at fourteen, he enrolled at the college to pursue a career.⁸

While at Harvard, Channing showed early interest in rhetoric. Biographer Arthur W. Brown writes that he “was particularly interested in everything that promised to improve his speaking and writing ability,” and he committed himself to reading the works of Longinus, Demosthenes, Campbell, Kames, and Blair, the last of whom he “knew by heart.” He was a member of the campus Speaking Club, elected president in his junior year and selected to give the valedictory address.⁹ In 1798 his classmates voted him commencement orator, the highest honor available to a graduating senior. When the faculty forbade him to address political

topics—hoping thereby to avoid repeating a controversial address from the previous spring—he tendered his resignation. President Joseph Willard ultimately relented, and Channing’s classmates celebrated his demonstrated commitment to freedom of speech.¹⁰ Even as a teenager, he felt deeply the importance of intellectual liberty and a pointed aversion to those who would restrict it.

Recognizing his family’s financial straits, Channing sought self-sufficiency after college, hoping to pay his own way while also settling on a career path. That opportunity arose in the form of David Meade Randolph, a Virginian summer visitor who proposed to hire the young graduate as a tutor at his home in Richmond. Channing left Newport in October, 1798, and would remain in his new position for just under two significant years. In her assessment of Channing’s southern sojourn, biographer Madeleine Hooke Rice emphasizes his exposure to new ideas and dispositions. Jeffersonian Virginia introduced Republican sensibilities foreign to a native of Federalist New England, and the Randolph home was frequented by prestigious exponents of such views.¹¹ Though acknowledging Channing’s loneliness during this period, Rice touts the intellectual growth afforded by evenings of solitude and prolonged reading by candlelight. In letters home and later reflections Channing would identify his stay in Virginia as a time of fresh ideas on religion, politics, and morality, among other subjects.¹²

In his biography, Mendelsohn notes the physical effects of this intensive mental labor. Though critical to Channing’s intellectual and spiritual growth, his ascetic lifestyle in Richmond damaged his health in lasting ways. When he returned to Newport after twenty-one months away, the difference was palpable. “The family was stunned by this pallid shadow of the compact, sturdy young man they had sent off to Richmond,” Mendelsohn writes. “But there were depths in him that could not otherwise have been.”¹³ Indeed, this Virginia period was the moment in Channing’s life—if in fact such a moment is to be marked—when he formally converted to Christian faith and committed his life to Christian service.¹⁴ Shortly after his return to Newport, he preached his first sermon, at Medford, and in 1802 he returned to Cambridge to serve as Regent at Harvard. In 1803 he accepted a call to the pulpit of Boston’s Federal Street Church, a post that he would hold for the rest of his life.

From early on, Channing’s preaching was marked by a distinct earnestness of expression and a strong emphasis on moral improvement. Though fallen and inherently sinful, humanity was to his mind also infinitely perfectible, called to work tirelessly in the pursuit of goodness in personal, political, and religious life.¹⁵ He came to the pulpit with a civic mindset that challenged listeners to fulfill their potential both as Christians and as citizens. “All men, he declared, must be made aware of their duties and obligations to each other, to their community, and to the nation,” Brown writes. “It was his duty to assist them in developing and directing their highest faculties.” This message, relayed with “power and grace,” drew large audiences and revitalized what had been a congregation in decline. Brown adds that “the range of his thought and the simplicity of his style were gratifying to men and women accustomed either to evangelical ranting or lackluster dogmatizing,” and that “the chief novelty in his preaching was the directness with which he brought his Christian principles to bear upon actual life,” understanding the world as “a magnificent scene for glorifying God and for educating the human spirit.”¹⁶

Though still physically delicate and inclined toward solitude, Channing impressed his hearers with a robust spirituality and a practical cast of mind. Indeed, so evident was the contrast between his material form and mystical content that his romantic contemporaries were prone to a certain grandiosity when trying to describe him. His biographer William Henry Channing—also his nephew—is exemplary in this respect. Of his uncle’s delivery at Federal Street, he writes:

The seriousness of his deportment, the depth and sweetness of his voice, the pathos with which he read the Scriptures and sacred poetry, the solemnity of his appeals, his rapt and kindling enthusiasm, his humble, trustful spirit of prayer, his subdued feeling, so expressive of personal experience, made religion a new reality; while his whole air and look of spirituality won them to listen by its mild and somewhat melancholy beauty.¹⁷

Rhetorical flourish aside, it is clear from this and other testimony that Channing's pulpit presence offered his audiences something that they had been denied during the preceding years, popularly labelled "the driest in the history of the American pulpit."¹⁸ It was this ethereal quality that propelled him, by the 1810s, into public notoriety beyond the Boston limits. In those years, his developing celebrity and increasingly liberal theology would place him at the center of a roiling controversy.

The Unitarian Controversy

Throughout his first decade of preaching, Channing was notoriously difficult to classify. Since his sermons contained frequent nods to positions held by both the theological liberals and conservatives of his day, he was largely excused from the religious factionalism by which friends and enemies were identified and categorized. Conciliatory by temperament, he did not seek out the contention and controversy by which other men made their reputations. That changed in 1815, when a provocative pamphlet by Jedidiah Morse—and its subsequent review in a popular orthodox journal—prompted Channing to reply in print, marshalling his rhetorical skill in defense of liberal theology and intellectual liberty. That reply invited others, spawning a heated public exchange that laid the groundwork for his Baltimore sermon. But all of this occurred within a context both larger and older. Conrad Wright situates the prelude between 1735 and 1805, from the start of the Great Awakening to the election of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard.¹⁹

The internecine feud known eventually as the "Unitarian Controversy" was the product of disagreements dating back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Though never entirely faithful to John Calvin, the American Puritans did observe his major doctrines, including the depravity of man and the election of the saints.²⁰ Together, these ideas cast human beings into a fallen and helpless condition, leaving them hoping against hope to have been chosen for an eternal bliss far beyond anything their own efforts might deserve. In the Calvinist tradition, this abject submission to God was requisite for humble spirits and true worship. In practice, it fostered a pervasive, existential anxiety. Certain implications of the doctrine also allowed for the development of splinter factions with a pair of formidable critiques. The first of these, known as *Antinomianism*, observed that the doctrine of predestination effectively invalidated all human works, either for well or ill. If people were incapable of earning their way into the elect by being good, then they were equally incapable of earning their way out by being bad, and so salvation was entirely untethered to behavior—a claim that, if logically consistent, still offended Puritan sensibilities and threatened social order.²¹

The second faction, known as *Arminianism*, argued that humans possess a limited degree of moral agency, and can therefore choose—via God's grace—to pursue a life of holiness and faith bound ultimately for assured salvation. In reserving for humanity an active role in personal atonement, Arminians were frequently accused of espousing a covenant of works that encroached upon God's divine prerogatives. And, yet, by offering a corrective of sorts to the

Antinomian heresy, Arminianism slowly gained traction among certain Congregational thinkers.²² Though both terms were employed far more often as accusation than as self-identification, the latter, at least, did produce a movement.

In Wright's telling, Arminianism began to achieve tangible—if still very subtle—influence during the 1730s, around the time of New England's first revivals. In these years, bursts of religious enthusiasm began to appear in the countryside around Boston, encouraged first by Jonathan Edwards and, later, by English evangelist George Whitefield. When Whitefield returned to England in 1740, revivalism was driven in the colonies by popular figures including James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent.²³ Their emotional, energetic, and generally itinerant preaching was opposed by patrician figures, including Boston's Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew.²⁴ Though ostensibly a split over stylistic concerns, this rift was informed by a host of others, including divides between urban and rural, rich and poor, farmer and merchant, educated and uneducated, and more. As the well-to-do merchant classes of Boston and the eastern seaboard tended to look down on revivalism, the farmers of the interior and the Connecticut Valley were swept up in it. These complex relationships imposed themselves even upon more specialized theological debates, including those then dividing the curricula at Harvard and Yale. The Harvard-trained coastal clergy tended to defend the traditional order, while the Yale-trained country pastors generally embraced the innovations associated with revivalism. Thus, the divines changed with the times, and factionalism was established in New England.

It was the Boston elites, by and large, who became Arminians. Though their defense of tradition might cast them in a conservative role, their theological commitments were increasingly liberal. Over the course of about seven decades, their sermons and writings grappled with important ideas and implications. Contra Calvin, they rejected the doctrine of total depravity, arguing that hereditary original sin amounted to God's authorship of evil in human hearts—including, incredibly, those of infants. They mainstreamed the doctrine of free will, establishing that human beings exist as agents with the ability to choose between good and evil, and that personal choice bears upon the salvation of souls. They revised the doctrines of justification and sanctification, understanding regeneration as a gradual process of progressive development rather than an instantaneous shift. They embraced Enlightenment-era rationalism, pairing reason with revelation as the means by which humans might discern God's will. Along the way, they reimagined the nature of God himself, moving him from an arbitrary and vengeful posture to something far more caring and reasonable. Treating now with a compassionate, benevolent deity, some went so far as to infer the unconditional salvation of *all humanity*. Finally, many Arminians began to challenge the doctrine of the trinity, imagining God as Father alone, rather than as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It was this alteration that would soon align New England liberalism with an ascendant English Unitarianism. In 1805, even as Channing was establishing himself on Federal Street, liberal theologian Henry Ware was elected to the distinguished Hollis Chair of Divinity at Harvard, effectively completing the Arminian rise to power.²⁵

Aside from the considerable distractions wrought by the War of 1812, the decade from 1805 to 1815 in New England was thus largely defined by simmering religious tensions between liberal and orthodox Christian factions. Though liberals touted a broad-minded openness to diverse perspectives, the orthodox insisted upon narrow adherence to the traditional creeds. In their view, the growing list of liberal revisions amounted to a complete abdication of Christian principle, and the liberal promotion of intellectual liberty cleverly disguised a concerted effort at religious subversion. Many orthodox writers charged in print that so-called "liberal Christians" were actually more akin to English Unitarians—in their view, entirely separate from Christianity

and so detrimental to its preservation.²⁶ Liberals dismissed these accusations, asserting both their Christian commitments and their principled ecumenism, though often in vague terms. Mendelsohn characterizes the liberal pulpit rhetoric of these years as “laconic,” noting that “questionable aspects of creedal orthodoxy were simply not mentioned,” replaced instead by “Biblical phrases of contrary implication” and calls for “broad toleration.”²⁷ Orthodox critics noticed this as well, and became increasingly impatient with the equivocation.

The situation reached a breaking point in 1815, when Morse published material that, he argued, proved the liberals were operating in bad faith. Though the details of the episode are somewhat complex, they do lend themselves to summary. In 1812, the English Unitarian Thomas Belsham had published his *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend Theophilus Lindsey*, including a chapter in which he drew extensively on letters exchanged by the Unitarian Lindsey and the Boston liberal Rev. James Freeman. In these letters, Freeman and Lindsey had openly discussed a strategy for the gradual expansion and establishment of Unitarian ideas in New England—exactly the sort of quiet infiltration long alleged by the orthodox Calvinists and now openly endorsed by Belsham. Though the book had already been in print for over two years at that stage, it had not been widely read in Massachusetts. When Morse reprinted the chapter as a pamphlet, prefaced by his own accusatory commentary, the charge of duplicity acquired new substance.²⁸ When it was then reviewed by Jeremiah Evarts in the orthodox journal *Panopolist*, a series of specific charges were frankly leveled: first, that Belsham’s beliefs were typical of American liberals; second, that those beliefs were deliberately concealed within a tactical gradualism; and third, that orthodox and liberal factions could not peaceably coexist.²⁹

Anxious for a response, the liberals turned to William Ellery Channing, noted both for his rhetorical skill and his aversion to controversy. In 1815 Channing crafted a pair of open letters in reply to the orthodox critiques, each channeling his clarity of thought and emotional restraint.³⁰ In these letters he openly embraced the Unitarian designation for the first time, distinguishing his variety from the English strain and pointedly challenging orthodox readers to defend their Trinitarianism on biblical grounds. These volleys inspired others from Channing’s liberal allies, reframing the debate and carrying the Unitarian controversy into a new and more candid stage. In 1819, when Jared Sparks came to be ordained at the First Independent Church of Baltimore, Channing was invited to deliver the sermon. He used this opportunity to articulate a faith statement for American Unitarianism.

“Unitarian Christianity”

An 1815 graduate of Harvard, Jared Sparks had been for several years a congregant at Federal Street Church, where he was inspired by Channing’s preaching. He had then held a series of ministerial assignments in the Boston area prior to receiving the call to Baltimore. When that call came, members of the liberal leadership saw the ordination sermon as an opportunity to expand Unitarian influence beyond the confines of New England. Arthur W. Brown observes a pair of unusual circumstances attesting that the occasion had been carefully choreographed for wider publicity. First, “the cast of the supporting ministers was an unusually brilliant one,” with speeches from John Gorham Palfrey, Dr. Eliphalet Porter, Nathaniel Thayer, and Ichabod Nichols, and with the venerable Henry Ware, Sr. in attendance. Second, the sermon was composed for publication, with plans made in advance for “an unusually large number of copies (two thousand to be exact).”³¹ Channing had three objectives: “first, to set forth the principles adopted by Unitarians in interpreting the Scriptures and then some of the doctrines

which the Scriptures seemed clearly to express; second, to demonstrate the unreasonableness of Trinitarian dogma, its perplexity for the understanding and its ‘confusion for the pious heart’; and third, to oppose the doctrine of Christ’s double nature by emphasizing His unity.”³² In the process, he would carve out a space for theological diversity and intellectual liberty among American Christians. Having titled the sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” Channing spoke for Unitarians as a cohort and, importantly, as *Christians*. Every declaration arose from the pulpit behind an authoritative *we*.

Toward his first objective, Channing emphasized an approach to scriptural interpretation respectful of historical context and human rationality. Unwilling to read the Bible as a singular theological statement for all time, he characterized scripture as the record of “God’s successive revelations,” with the “last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ.” The books of the Old Testament—starting with the “dispensation of Moses”—were “adapted to the childhood of the human race,” preparing the way for the later revelations of Jesus and his Apostles, with these mature disclosures relaying the “divine authority” by which subsequent generations should live (3).³³ This view of scripture as situated within time and revealed progressively was fundamental to Channing’s theology. It imagined God as an author with an audience and a refined sensitivity to message. Since human knowledge and understanding expand and deepen over time, God had staggered his revelations to meet people where they were, in language that they were able to understand at each stage. It therefore made little sense to read all of scripture as equally germane to any given present, with Genesis afforded the same standing as Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. There was a temporal-theological progression at work, and the Bible should be read in its light.

The task of evaluating and interpreting scripture thus fell to human reason, the God-given faculty by which texts are considered, analyzed, and applied. Though orthodox critics accused liberals of reading too rationally—of reserving for human intellects a critical standing above the divine Word—Channing defended reason as a vital element of interpretation. Noting that “the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books,” he argued that God conforms “to the established rules of speaking and writing” (5). In order for divine communication to succeed, therefore, the receivers of the message must interpret it according to those same rules, or else stand accused of a “criminal want of candor,” of intentionally “obscuring or distorting” the meaning of the text (6). By insisting on a separate set of standards, Channing’s orthodox critics were guilty of their own accusation—of failing to treat the scriptures with the seriousness and care they deserve. This was especially true given the unusual nature of biblical composition. Scriptural language is “singularly glowing, bold, and figurative,” and so prone to “frequent departures from the literal sense.” The books refer “perpetually to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to controversies in the church, to feelings and usages which have passed away,” and so lend themselves to misunderstanding, with careless readers perhaps “extending to all times and places what was of a temporary and local application” (8). If anything, the scriptures warranted even *more* attention to historical context, even *more* exercise of critical reason than lesser, secular discourses. From the Unitarian method, they would receive it.

At minimum, Channing proposed to interpret the Bible with attention to the identity and stylistic habits of each writer, to the conventions and idioms of each moment, and to the core consistencies of the message throughout the text, placing different passages into conversation with each other to determine the spirit behind the letter. “We reason about the Bible precisely as citizens reason about the constitution under which we live,” he said, willing both “to limit one

provision of that venerable instrument by the others, and to fix the precise import of its parts by inquiring into its general spirit, into the intentions of its authors, and into the prevalent feelings, impressions, and circumstances of the time when it was framed” (10). In truth, all Christians performed this sort of analytical labor when reading scriptures, Channing argued. Most just downplayed or overlooked their own reasoning while casting a critical eye on that of their theological rivals. In their insistence that liberal reasoning was irreparably compromised by the innate depravity of the human mind, orthodox critics flirted with an intractable skepticism that placed the entire Christian project in jeopardy. “It is worthy of remark how nearly the bigot and the skeptic approach,” Channing said. “Both would annihilate our confidence in our faculties, and both throw doubt and confusion over every truth” (12). Though human reasoning was indeed fraught with the potential for error, it was a grave mistake to proceed as though reason could be safely detached from the interpretative process. “Say what we may,” Channing declared, “God has given us a rational nature and will call us to account for it.” Indeed, “We may wish, in our sloth, that God had given us a system demanding no labor of comparing, limiting, and inferring. But such a system would be at variance with the whole character of our present existence; and it is the part of wisdom to take revelation as it is given to us, and to interpret it by the help of the faculties which it everywhere supposes and on which it is founded” (13). If the Bible means anything, he stressed, that divine meaning is conveyed in the conventions of human language and so accessible to the faculties of human reason.

Finally, Channing confronted the persistent objection that, even if human reason is capable of valid inferences, it is so far beneath God’s omniscience as to throw all of its conclusions into doubt. An argument in circulation at least since Augustine, the claim had garnered support from orthodox thinkers who privileged a plain reading of the text. Channing replied that, “it is impossible that a teacher of infinite wisdom should expose those whom he would teach to infinite error” (14). Much like the liberal critique of total depravity—that a loving God could not inscribe sin into the inherent character of his creatures—this retort disqualified an orthodox belief that seemed inconsistent with God’s agreed upon qualities. “A wise teacher discovers his wisdom in adapting himself to the capacities of his pupils,” Channing said, “not in perplexing them with what is unintelligible, not in distressing them with apparent contradictions, not in filling them with a skeptical distrust of their own powers” (15). Though characteristically restrained and temperate, Channing’s articulate dismissal of these complaints disclosed a marked impatience. In making his case for a reasonable faith, he indicted his adversaries as unreasonable and obtuse.

Having established the basis for a Unitarian hermeneutics, Channing turned to his second and third objectives, explaining how this hermeneutics challenged Trinitarian views on God and Jesus. He did this by presenting and defending five key points. Appropriately, the first of these emphasized God’s *unity*, identifying God-the-Father as God alone while demoting Son and Spirit. “The proposition that there is one God seems to us exceedingly plain,” Channing said. “We understand by it that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong” (17). Objecting to the Trinitarian view as “irrational and unscriptural,” Channing declared himself “astonished that any man can read the New Testament and avoid the conviction that the Father alone is God.” Since the gospels frequently distinguish between God and Jesus—noting that, for instance, “God sent his Son” and “God anointed Jesus”—and since Jesus himself frequently refers to the Father as God, Unitarians saw no grounds for conflating the two. “With Jesus,” Channing said, “we worship the Father as the only living and true God.” He challenged his critics to identify even

one verse in the gospels that identifies God as a tripartite being, suggesting instead that the idea is traceable to unscrupulous theologians presumptuous enough “to invent forms of words altogether unsanctioned by Scriptural phraseology” (19). Indefensible under scrutiny and destructive to Christian devotion, the Trinitarian doctrine amounted essentially to a form of polytheism.

Channing’s second point pivoted from the first to explain the Unitarian view on Jesus. Like God, Jesus was to be understood as a singular, unified being. Distinct from God, he was made of entirely human material. In complicating and confusing the nature of God-as-Father, Trinitarian doctrine had further confused the nature of Jesus-as-Son. “According to this doctrine,” Channing said, “Jesus Christ, instead of being one mind, one conscious, intelligent principle whom we can understand, consists of two souls, two minds; the one divine, the other human; the one weak, the other almighty; the one ignorant, the other omniscient.” Having bifurcated Christ, the Trinitarians muddled his character, placing “an enormous tax on human credulity” (25). Again, Channing challenged his opponents to find a verse, “some plain, direct passage where Christ is said to be composed of two minds infinitely different yet constituting one person,” before concluding, “We find none” (26). Instead, Unitarians identified passages that distinguish Jesus from God, noting that these “not only speak of him as another being, but seem to labor to express his inferiority” (29). To their mind, Jesus was very clearly the servant of God, anointed and sent by God to achieve divine purposes, but yet singularly human. So understood, Christ’s sacrifice was all the more moving since it was not anesthetized by any superhuman power. The Unitarian view, Channing said, “renders his sufferings, and his patience and love in bearing them, incomparably more impressive and affecting” than the Trinitarian alternative (32).

Channing stressed the “moral perfection of God” in his third point, hoping to correct errors in the orthodox view of God’s nature (33). Though it may be assumed that all Christians agreed on God’s benevolence and majesty, Channing had his doubts. Specifically, the irrationality he identified in Calvinist orthodoxy rebounded as irreverence when applied to the divine character. If God was capable of damning millions of human beings prior to birth, creating them into a life of suffering bound irreversibly for hell, then he was not a God of love or justice. The orthodox had adopted instead a “very injurious view of the Supreme Being,” raising him, “by his greatness and sovereignty, above the principles of morality, above those eternal laws of equity and rectitude to which all other beings are subjected” (35). Ruling the universe as tyrant, this God was exempt from the very moral codes that he was believed to impose on humanity, and so defined more by capriciousness than care. This the Unitarians could not abide. “We believe,” Channing said, “that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words—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” (36). Theirs was a God of both justice and mercy, balancing these values in appropriate measure. He was instructive yet forgiving, critical yet compassionate. “To give our views of God in one word,” Channing said, “we believe in his parental character” (39). God the Father was a father indeed, with all of the warmth, assurance, and support of an attentive parent. To understand God in these terms was to honor him absolutely while reaping the earthly rewards of a healthy and harmonious vision. The orthodox view, defined by chaos and terror, exerted destructive influence. “It tends to discourage the timid, to give excuses to the bad, to feed the vanity of the fanatical, and to offer shelter to the bad feelings of the malignant,” Channing said. “By shocking, as it does, the fundamental principles of morality, and by exhibiting a severe and partial Deity, it tends strongly to pervert the moral faculty, to form a gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion, and to lead men to substitute

ensoriousness, bitterness, and persecution for a tender and impartial charity” (42). Faulting the orthodox view as “false and dishonorable,” Channing declared that Unitarians “feel ourselves bound to resist unceasingly” (43).

Channing turned, fourth, back to Jesus and to the character of his mediatory role. Having already consigned Christ to a purely human nature, Channing sought to clarify the Unitarian view on his ministry, death, and resurrection. “We believe that he was sent by the Father to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance of mankind,” Channing said, “that is, to rescue men from sin and its consequences, and to bring them to a state of everlasting purity and happiness.” The means to this achievement were varied, including his “instructions regarding God’s unity, parental character, and moral government,” his “promises of pardon to the penitent,” his guidance on “the path of duty,” his “own spotless example,” his “threatenings against incorrigible guilt,” his “glorious discoveries of immortality,” his “sufferings and death,” his “resurrection,” his “continual intercession,” and “the power with which he is invested of raising the dead, judging the world, and conferring the everlasting rewards promised to the faithful” (44). Though admitting of some internal disagreement on certain points, Channing distinguished the body of Unitarian Christology from that of the orthodox. While Trinitarians identified Jesus as part and parcel of God, the Unitarians believed him a natural man chosen by God for supernatural work. To achieve that earthly task, he was endowed with unearthly ability, and upon resurrection he assumed a place of prominence in the life to come. This view stood in sharp contrast to that of the orthodox, which interpreted Christ’s crucifixion as the singular payment of humanity’s debt. The Unitarians agreed in rejecting the claim that Christ’s death was necessary for “making God placable or merciful,” or that it “procures forgiveness for men.” Indeed, having rejected the doctrine of natural depravity upon which this belief was based, they dismissed it all as “unscriptural and absurd” (47). In the Unitarian view, Christ came to guide humanity away from sin, not to satisfy the seething rage of a vengeful God.

Fifth and finally, Channing explained the Unitarian understanding of Christian holiness—the way of life following logically on the heels of the preceding beliefs. In particular, he sought to challenge the traditional Calvinist view that all goodness comes from God, originating above and beyond the best efforts of humanity. Instead, Channing embraced the Arminian view that humans have the potential to be either good or evil, entitling them to recognition for their moral striving and exempting God from the micromanagement of all virtue. “We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man,” he said, “and in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience.” Virtuous behavior was traceable to the “moral faculties” of human beings, which in turn grounded human responsibility (49). By granting moral agency and accountability to human choice, Channing raised human activity above that of animal instinct, acknowledging a capacity for free will absent in the Calvinist automaton. In so doing, he also leveled a critique at the revivalists routinely fooled by a counterfeit enthusiasm, taken by “the error that there can be no excess in feelings which have God as their object.” The Unitarian, free to act and guided always by self-control, could not be vulnerable to the flights of emotionalism, but the Calvinist was susceptible to every traveling orator. “We owe it to truth and religion,” Channing said, “to maintain that fanaticism, partial insanity, sudden impressions, and ungovernable transports are anything rather than piety” (52).

In closing, Channing drew the audience once more to the holistic nature of these five beliefs, standing together against the “five points” of Calvinism. Though accused lately of duplicity and subversion, he declared that the Unitarians were committed to open proclamation of their doctrine. The statement was one of his most eloquent:

That we wish to spread it, we have no desire to conceal; but we think that we wish its diffusion because we regard it as more friendly to practical piety and pure morals than the opposite doctrines, because it gives clearer and nobler views of duty and stronger motives to its performance, because it recommends religion at once to the understanding and the heart, because it asserts the lovely and venerable attributes of God, because it tends to restore the benevolent spirit of Jesus to his divided and afflicted church, and because it cuts off every hope of God's favor except that which springs from practical conformity to the life and precepts of Christ (59).

With that he turned to address Rev. Sparks, wished him well, and consecrated him in the work (60). To the audience, he reasserted his text from I Thessalonians, "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good" (61). Though exceedingly brief, the verse seemed to capture well the Unitarian theology.

Unusual in so many ways, Channing's sermon was unusual also for its length, running approximately 90 minutes. The sympathetic audience was attentive, and many in attendance were aware that the address was on its way to a much larger *reading* public. His remarks concluded, Channing was physically and mentally exhausted. He spent the following day in seclusion, meeting occasionally with friends and allies to discuss the speech and its subsequent publication. Though the other assembled ministers contributed to a daylong slate of topical sermons, Channing asked to be excused. The next morning he departed Baltimore for Boston, by way of New York City. "Unitarian Christianity" departed for the printers.

Conclusion

No sooner did the sermon appear in print than a new cycle of pamphleteering was launched, first by Professor Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary. His *Letter to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing* was answered by Andrews Norton of Harvard in his *A Statement of Reasons*. As expected, the orthodox case defended a complete and literal reading of the Bible while the liberal rejoinder stressed a "rational" reading based on careful consideration of the historical contexts. As before, it continued in this fashion. Though otherwise quiet during the exchange, Channing did contribute a pair of articles for discussion. These appeared in *The Christian Disciple* in 1819 and 1820, the first defending Unitarianism from the Calvinist critique, and the second critiquing Calvinism from a Unitarian perspective. In the course of making *The Moral Argument against Calvinism*, he defended human reason in language that seemed to anticipate Ralph Waldo Emerson. "The ultimate reliance of a human being," he said, "is and must be on his own mind."³⁴

In the grand sweep of American religious history, the importance of the sermon is in some ways difficult to measure. Though Unitarianism did enjoy a subsequent period of growth in New England—aided materially by the "Dedham decision" of 1820—the tradition did not achieve much hegemonic influence across the nation as a whole.³⁵ It persisted, rather, as one voice among many calling in the wilderness, preparing their respective ways for the Lord. And yet, Channing's sermon was clearly a clarion call for the liberal religious, inspiring many young clerics to assert their freedom and follow their intellects. Some of these would be members, later, of the "Transcendental Club," including Emerson, George Ripley, Theodore Parker, James Freeman Clarke, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, among others. Through their successes, Channing's work would develop a long legacy with religious, literary, and political strands.³⁶

Even on its own merits, though, “Unitarian Christianity” stands as an articulate, restrained, and powerful oration. In his treatment, Mendelsohn writes that the speech was “an effort of greater subtlety” than most appreciate. “There was not a single premise in the Calvinist system,” he writes, “that Channing did not isolate, examine, discard, and replace.” In dismantling the dark and punitive doctrines of Calvin, Channing traded each for a brighter, more hopeful alternative. Ultimately, he succeeded in promoting a Christian faith whereby the “supreme object” was “not to avoid punishment, but to cultivate and communicate virtue.”³⁷ This, more than anything, may be Channing’s lasting contribution to American religiosity. In the United States, hopefulness and freedom are always in vogue. In that fertile soil, the seeds of religious liberty will always find nutrients to grow.

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Notes

¹ There is an extensive literature on American revivalism from the first (1735-1745) to the second (1825-1835) “Great Awakenings” and after, referring to outbreaks of highly emotional worship practices marked by physical and psychological manifestations. Consider, for example, Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); John H. Smith, *The First Great Awakening: Redefining Religion in British America, 1725-1775* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016); and William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005). For arguably the most famous example of a revivalist sermon, see Jonathan J. Edwards, “Jonathan Edwards, ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ (8 July 1741),” *Voices of Democracy* 1 (2006): 187-207.

² Jack Mendelsohn, *Channing: The Reluctant Radical* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 22-23.

³ Perhaps more than any other quality, liberal Christianity has been defined by its commitment to free inquiry, allowing adherents a greater degree of flexibility than more creed-driven traditions. Channing’s most exemplary predecessors in this regard are Jonathan Mayhew and Charles Chauncy. See, for example, Patrick J. Mullins, *Father of Liberty: Jonathan Mayhew and the Principles of the American Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017) and John S. Oakes, *Conservative Revolutionaries: Transformation and Tradition in the Religious and Political Thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

⁴ John W. Chadwick, *William Ellery Channing: Minister of Religion* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Company, 1903), 1.

⁵ Chadwick, *William Ellery Channing*, 14.

⁶ Herbert Wallace Schneider has argued that Channing’s work was largely shaped by three historical currents flowing through his youth and adulthood—rationalism, pietism, and republicanism. See Herbert Wallace Schneider, “The Intellectual Background of William Ellery Channing,” *Church History* 7, no. 1 (1938): 3-23.

⁷ Quoted in William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing, D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1904; Hicksville, NY: Regina Press, 1975), 13.

⁸ Madeleine Hooke Rice, *Federal Street Pastor: The Life of William Ellery Channing* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), 21-23.

⁹ Arthur W. Brown, *Always Young for Liberty: A Biography of William Ellery Channing* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1956), 20, 23.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn, *Reluctant Radical*, 34-35; Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 31-33.

¹¹ Notably, Channing lived in Virginia from 1798-1800, the two years preceding the presidential contest that pitted Republican Thomas Jefferson against the Federalist John Adams—and, oddly, other Republican Aaron Burr—commonly ranked among the most bitterly divisive races in American history. The context and controversies are featured in Mary Stuckey, *Deplorable: The Worst Presidential Campaigns from Jefferson to Trump* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021): 28-41).

¹² Rice, *Federal Street Pastor*, 31-39.

¹³ Mendelsohn, *Channing*, 45.

¹⁴ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 43; Mendelsohn, *Reluctant Radical*, 44; Rice, *Federal Street Pastor*, 38-39.

¹⁵ Channing's theological views evolved somewhat over time. For a discussion of this growth, see the first third of Conrad Wright's essay "The Channing We Don't Know," in Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Skinner House, 1994), 155-166.

¹⁶ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 59.

¹⁷ Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing*, 116-117.

¹⁸ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 63.

¹⁹ Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of American Unitarianism* (Camden, CT: Archon, 1976; Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 3.

²⁰ There is by now a massive bibliography of excellent volumes on Puritan thought and belief. But it begins with Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard/Belknap, 1939).

²¹ The most famous instance arose with the "Antinomian Controversy" of the 1630s, centering on Anne Hutchinson. See, for example, Michael P. Winship, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

²² The relationship between Antinomianism and Arminianism is summarized succinctly in Wright, *Beginnings of American Unitarianism*, 15-17.

²³ The Great Awakening was first heralded by Edwards in his *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*, published in 1737. His complete works from the era are now published as Philip F. Gura, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: Writings from the Great Awakening* (New York: Library of America, 2013).

²⁴ The matter of *itinerancy* is important to this history. Prior to the 1730s, the theo-political nature of Massachusetts governance allowed for the appointment of stationary pastors within established parishes, where their salaries were drawn from local taxpayers. When traveling preachers began to encroach on this territory, the local clergy interpreted the imposition as an attack on their sermonizing—which, in many cases, it was. This dynamic is explored in Wright, *Beginnings of American Unitarianism*, 38-45.

²⁵ The conservative side and the particular points of contention are explored in greater depth by Mary Kupiec Cayton in her "Who Were the Evangelicals?: Conservative and Liberal Identity in the Unitarian Controversy in Boston, 1804-1833," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 85-107.

²⁶ In the years after 1794, Unitarian minister and English emigre Joseph Priestley contributed to the propagation of such distinctly Unitarian ideas, especially in Pennsylvania. Historian J.D. Bowers argues that Priestley's influence has been slighted by Wright, among other earlier writers. See J.D. Bowers, *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Mendelsohn, *Reluctant Radical*, 135.

²⁸ Jedidiah Morse, *Review of American Unitarianism*, 1815, <https://archive.org/details/reviewofamericanunit00mors/page/n5>.

²⁹ Mendelsohn, *Reluctant Radical*, 142.

³⁰ See, for instance, William Ellery Channing, “A Letter to the Rev. Samuel C. Thacher: on the Aspersion Contained in a Late Number of The Panoplist, on the Ministers of Boston and the Vicinity,” 1815, <https://archive.org/details/lettertoevsamue00chan/page/n8>.

³¹ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 131.

³² Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 131-132.

³³ All passages from Channing’s speech are cited with reference to the paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the VOD website.

³⁴ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 135-136. Channing’s early influence over the Transcendentalists—who he ultimately disavowed—is difficult to overstate. See, for example, William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959): 12, 16, 18-19, 31, 42-43, 48, 149-150; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007): 7, 35-37, 70-71, 73, 137, 182, 185, 194, 199; Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007): 5-6, 44, 90.

³⁵ Also known as *Baker v. Fales*, the Dedham case introduced the question of whether church property was owned by the church or the parish, and whether church decisions should be limited to church members. Decided by the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1820, the ruling facilitated the rapid spread of Unitarian churches in the Commonwealth and prepared the way for formal disestablishment in 1833. See Conrad Wright, “The Dedham Case Revisited,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 3 (1988): 15–39.

³⁶ Noting that the Transcendental Club was started at his suggestion, Marie Hochmuth credits Channing with conversational powers of equal or greater stature. See Marie Hochmuth, “William Ellery Channing, New England Conversationalist,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 30, no. 4 (1944): 429-439.

³⁷ Mendelsohn, *Reluctant Radical*, 162.