

**A LOSS OF FAITH**  
Reasons for the Unitarian Split  
from Congregationalism

by  
Adrienne Eggleston

Presented to Rev. Phil Jackson, Dean  
The Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the course  
in Congregational History and Polity  
December 31, 2000

A serious problem in attempting to determine the causes for the beginning of Unitarianism as a separate entity from Congregationalism is the fact that many authors on the subject see those opposed to liberalism as actually causing the split.

In this paper I shall look at Unitarianism in England, The First Great Awakening, the staunchly conservative Trinitarianism of Jedidiah Morse, the appointment of Henry Ware to the Hollis professorship at Harvard University, and the desire of the “New Lights” who could no longer accept the strict predestination of Calvinism as being possible causes of the deepening discontent which eventually led to what one author called “one of the most serious disruptions – the rise of Unitarianism.”<sup>1</sup>

Brauer tells us that in the early nineteenth century the nation as a whole as well as the churches were in a foment of dissent and quarreling. The different sections of the country and different states were putting their own desires before the welfare of the country as a whole.

The rise of Unitarianism in New England, according to Brauer, cost Congregationalists over half a million dollars worth of property and over one third of their membership in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> Let us look at some of the possible reasons for that rise.

“Unitarianism in general is that form of Christianity that denies the doctrine of the Trinity, maintaining that God exists in one person only.”<sup>3</sup>

Monarchians in the second and third centuries believed in the undivided

---

<sup>1</sup> Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 124.

<sup>2</sup> Brauer, 125.

<sup>3</sup> “Unitarianism,” Microsoft  $\square$  Encarta  $\square$  Online Encyclopedia 2000.

unity of God and denied the Trinity. The teachings of Arius also denied the existence of a Trinitarian God. These roots of modern Unitarianism can be traced to the Protestant Reformation. At that time many theologians began questioning the doctrine of the Trinity in general. This questioning was a little too much reforming, however, and the questions were not generally well tolerated. Poland and Transylvania became centers of refuge for those whose radical thinking could lead to their deaths. Faustus Socinus was one who fled Italy for Poland. He emphasized the complete humanity of Jesus, thereby denying His divinity, of course. This is a view still commonly held by many modern Unitarians. Ferenc David taught that prayers could not be addressed to Jesus since He was only human. David founded what is now the oldest extant Unitarian body but died in prison in 1579.<sup>4</sup> British, and later American Unitarianism grew from dissenting groups within the Church of England and also from Congregational churches in the Eastern United States.

Conrad Wright claims that Unitarian thought in New England was of indigenous origin, largely independent in its earliest stages of similar tendencies in English thought. The New England liberals were called Arminians, not because they were influenced directly by Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), the Dutch Remonstrant, but because their reaction against Calvinism was similar to his. They were descended spiritually as well as biologically from the settlers of the Bay Colony, and to a very significant extent, their Arminianism was a development out of Puritanism under the pressure of social as well as intellectual forces.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> "Unitarianism and Universalism," Britannica.com. 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Beginning of Unitarianism in America* ( Boston: Starr King Press),1955, 6.

What Wright considers to be a purely North American, non-European phenomenon, however, many other authors consider to be connected as far back as the third century A.D.

Arminianism was being openly preached before 1750 as was anti-Trinitarianism. Wright claims that although, "Arminianism in Massachusetts resembled the prevailing English theology of the Age of Reason... Its roots were deep in New England Puritanism; and the drift toward Liberalism that it represented were greatly stimulated by native social and intellectual pressures. Had the Colonies been entirely cut off from outside intellectual influence, the New England doctrine would still have been transformed under the pressure of insistent social forces."<sup>6</sup>

Wright continues, "The Arminians said that the efficacy of God's grace depended on whether man receives or rejects it.... Finite man would then have a power that the infinite God has not."<sup>7</sup>

Arminianism was common in the Church of England even wholly dominant according to Wright. Consequently there was the growth of Anglicanism in the new cities. King's Chapel in Boston twice split off new congregations. Some Congregational churches in Connecticut became Church of England. Included in their congregations were tutors from Yale. Yale subsequently deposed Rector Timothy Cutter and demanded that tutors make a statement of faith as a condition of employment.

At King's Chapel the Liberals called James Freeman. A new Book of Common Prayer was adopted which eliminated Christ. Unitarians

---

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, 15.

would continue, however, to state that Christ was the Messiah and that they were Christians.<sup>8</sup>

Congregationalism in New England in the early eighteenth century was “strictly Trinitarian except in Boston. There was but one Congregational Church in each town or precinct. All the inhabitants were expected to attend and required by law to support public worship in the meeting house. The minister was customarily settled for life, and an inhabitant of the town had no option as to the preaching he would hear.”<sup>9</sup> This situation would have guaranteed a minister a living and a congregation. Perhaps it would also have guaranteed complacency on the part of the preacher and, subsequently, boredom for the members of the congregation.

Into this situation came the Great Awakening with new ideas, excitement instead of complacency, itinerant preaching by different men, and often a general moving away from the traditional churches to which people had been bound.

Jonathan Edwards had a great fear that Arminianism would take over in the Colonies. George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, on the other hand, believed the unconverted clergy to be the main problem within the churches of their day. Needless to say, these unconverted clergy were opposed to the entire revival movement. Perhaps they could see the handwriting on the wall. Their days of complacency were numbered.

As a consequence of the Great Awakening, Congregationalism had three divisions among its clergy by the middle of the eighteenth century.

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen H. Ware Bailey, Lecture, Congregation Library, Boston: August 23, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, 38.

The New Lights supported revivals, and the Old Lights opposed them. To Edwards this represented a division into two groups, the forces of 'piety' and those of 'reason'. Charles Chauncy would have been the representative on the opposite side of the battle lines to Edwards. He put the Old Lights into the Arminian category as to their theology as well as being rationalist when it came to revivalism. In so doing, Edwards assigned all who opposed him to the Arminians while many of them were not yet to that stage in their theology. A third group, unseen by Edwards, developed with Samuel Mather as their leader. This group, the "Regular Lights", attempted to be mediators between the other two. "Yet in general terms, the divisions by the middle of the eighteenth century can be seen as encompassing three broad groups among those within the ranks of mainstream Congregationalism. At one pole were the New Light, or New Divinity, people, also known as Consistent Calvinists, represented by Jonathan Edwards and his followers. At the other extreme were the Old Lights, represented by Chauncy and many other liberals developing anti-Calvinist views. In the middle remained the Old Calvinists, whose most prominent member was Ezra Stiles, and who continued to search for reconciliation. In this task, however, they were not successful. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Old Calvinism had disappeared, and the division between the New Divinity and the Liberal movements reached its climax in the Unitarian separation."<sup>10</sup>

At the same time as the development of a newly modified Calvinism

---

<sup>10</sup> John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism 1620-1957* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press), 1992, 192.

there was also beginning a determination to move away from Calvin's strict theology. "Liberal leaders were again members of the Congregational clergy, located in this instance mainly in eastern Massachusetts. Although this movement was in no way as extensive as that of Jonathan Edwards' followers, it set the stage for that flowering in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century resulting in the Unitarian separation from Congregationalism."<sup>11</sup>

Historically and theologically, Von Rohr puts the main responsibility for the split squarely in the lap of the revivalists and reactions to them. As with several other authors we will discuss, it is a reaction against rather than a moving toward which causes the problems.

Congregationalism was the favored established religion of the New England states in the early nineteenth century. The state made the people responsible for supporting each Congregational minister by taxation. As this policy of taxation to support churching applied only to Congregational churches regardless of one's affiliation, several Protestant denominations banded together to overturn the tax. The Baptists, Episcopalians, and Methodists in Connecticut formed the Fusion or Toleration Party and were quickly successful. By 1818 all references which favored the State's Congregational churches had been obliterated by a new constitution. The same status was true for Congregational churches in Massachusetts as well. By 1823, however, this state also had ceased to offer special favor to any of its churches.

As Calvinism became more dogmatic "Very likely a perfectly natural

---

<sup>11</sup> Von Rohr, 218.

human and more or less unreasoned reaction against the dogmatic inhumanities of the current theology indicated the first line of liberal cleavage. After that a supporting theology was worked out for the more humane position. A dominant theology long worked over and out is like a great building whose strength is in its perfect balance of interlocking supports and strains. Take away any of its key supports and it begins to give way at other points. The liberal Eighteenth Century mind, rejecting an unpalatable Calvinism, began to question the whole of inherited orthodoxy. An Arminian could be a Trinitarian - witness the Wesleys - but once started down that road Unitarianism was reasonably inevitable for many of the liberal clergy."<sup>12</sup>

The authors see the beginning of this paragraph as too easy a generalization. Perhaps it is, but there is definitely the kernel of truth there as well. If the Calvinists had not clung so desperately to the idea of predestination as the only means of salvation, there might not have been the need to question the viability of that argument. When one side sticks so strongly to a belief, the other side is required to provide an explosion to separate itself from the beliefs of the original statement. The explosion away from the belief in predestination led to the changing of many other beliefs as well. Carrying the changes to an extreme led to the formation of a theology vastly different from its predecessor.

Debate of doctrinal issues had the effect of drawing a sharp line dividing the Arminian from the orthodox. The doctrine of original sin was one which incurred major debate. "Some, at least, of the orthodox

---

<sup>12</sup> Glenn Gaius Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism*, (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), 127.



seemed to realize that the battle with Arminianism would be won or lost on this issue; for if the concept of total depravity should disappear, the rest of the orthodox scheme would become irrelevant."<sup>13</sup>

The Second Church in Bradford saw the first battle. William Balch preached on the doctrine of justification by faith. This did not sit well with a group of his congregation, but they were never able to resolve their conflict satisfactorily so it simply festered.

Another minister, this time in Abington, was preaching on the idea that grace is given to us before we're converted. Again a minority expressed unhappiness with this preaching, but got no satisfaction from a council.

Jonathan Mayhew was ordained to serve Boston's West Church in 1747. Wright calls him one of "the two great leaders of the first generation of New England Arminians."<sup>14</sup> Problems with his ordination, however, caused his relations with other Boston ministers to be less than cordial. They had refused to be present at his ordination, so outlying churches were asked to send delegates. They did so and the ordination proceeded smoothly. Mayhew was given a more cordial reception by the other ministers when they all banded together against the Episcopalians. Apparently doctrinal issue became less important when considered against the opposition or possible growth of competing denominations.

He was good friends with Charles Chauncy, who was considered to be respectable. He was apparently, however, at least in the 1740's and 50's a closet Arminian. Between the two of them, Boston frequently heard

---

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, 63.

a liberal set of theological beliefs.

These beliefs, of which three are considered cardinal by George Willis Cooke, are a “recovery and restoration of primitive Christianity in its simplicity and power. The second opinion, to which they gave frequent utterance, was that the Bible is a divine revelation, the true source of all religious teaching, and the one sufficient creed for all men. The third position of the men of the liberal movement was that Christ is the only means of salvation; and they yielded to him unquestioning loyalty and faith.”<sup>15</sup>

The idea of the Bible being fundamentally necessary and salvation being achieved through Christ sound very much like something that could be preached at any Congregational church today. Then we go on to read of Mayhew preaching on the doctrine of free will. “In man he found a self determining power, the source of his moral and intellectual freedom. He said that we are more certain of the fact that we are free than we are of the truth of Christianity.” He described Christianity as a “practical science, the art of living piously and virtuously.”<sup>16</sup>

This reprint from Mayhew’s sermons in 1755 and 1783, on the other hand, does not sound like doctrine which would be believable in even the most liberal Congregational churches. To describe Christianity as a practical science is to misunderstand the doctrine in a fundamentally unsound manner. Where does the question of faith come into the practical science?

---

<sup>15</sup> George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Cooke, 62.

The election of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard College began a bitter controversy that caused splits within the Congregational community for years afterward and led to a rise in Arminianism and eventual growth of liberal churches. To understand the controversy in its entirety we need to look at the circles of power in Massachusetts and Boston which were controlled by Arminians or Calvinists, Liberals or those of the orthodox persuasion. By 1805 the Arminian movement had not grown a great deal. "Most of the important Arminians were to be found within twenty miles of Boston."<sup>17</sup> Only one of the nine Congregational churches in Boston was headed by an orthodox minister in 1804. Most of these men were graduates of Harvard College, but it was not true that most Harvard graduates were of the Arminian persuasion. Yale, on the other hand, was growing in influence. Arminian ministers were limited to a small area of available pulpits while Yale graduates, orthodox Trinitarians, had a wide area from which to choose. Recent Harvard graduates found no sympathy in the entire state of Connecticut as well as areas of Massachusetts. The few Arminian graduates of Yale became Episcopalian ministers as a general rule, because "they found no place in the churches of the Standing Order in Connecticut."<sup>18</sup>

Various societies were founded that included local ministers on their membership roles. In Boston the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, founded in 1780, included Arminian ministers as leaders of the organization. The Wednesday Evening Club, founded in 1777 had many

---

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Beginnings*, 253.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, 258.

of those of the highest social standing on its membership list. Thirteen of the fourteen members belonged to liberal Boston churches in 1803. There were many clubs and societies founded at this time in Boston. They provided a place where prominent Liberals could meet and have a variety of social contacts. The groups were not exclusively Liberal, however. Ministers and laymen of other leanings were also accepted.

Unlike the concentration of liberal ministers, the orthodox were scattered throughout the New England area. The Hopkinsians, or followers of Samuel Hopkins' theories of humanity's inevitable guilt, "became institutionalized with the founding of the Massachusetts Missionary Society."<sup>19</sup> It is at this point that intrigue begins to be seen.

"In 1804, the Reverend Jedidiah Morse, D.D., of Charlestown was the only trustee of the Massachusetts Missionary Society who was definitely not a Hopkinsian. Yet it may be surmised that his presence on the board was no accident. It was rather an essential part of a bold scheme which he had very clearly in mind: a realignment of the religious groups in Massachusetts."<sup>20</sup> Morse had a plan to break up the friendly relations between liberals and moderates and turn Massachusetts into another Connecticut.

Morse loved a controversial situation, he was brilliant at working out strategies, and he was familiar with members of all three of Boston's clergy groups. He worked within the framework of these groups and was eventually in the position to become a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard College. Morse was soon embroiled in controversy over his

---

<sup>19</sup> Wright, 268.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, 269.

orthodox views and also over a geography he had authored which had numerous errors in it. One of the liberal ministers he had insulted with his overtly and unforgiving Trinitarian views took exception to his apparent lack of geographic prowess and published a pamphlet listing a large variety of errors in Morse's work.

Morse and his adversaries ceased their quarrels and united against what Wright calls, "the spread of infidelity."<sup>21</sup> Morse did not fit comfortably with the liberals. His more favored companions were David Tappan who held the Hollis Professorship of Divinity at Harvard, and Eliphalet Pearson a Professor of Languages at the Cambridge Institution. Both of these men were to be involved in an event of great significance to the Arminians Morse was determined to defeat.

Professor Tappan died in 1803 leaving the Hollis Professorship vacant. The Hollis endowment provided for "a man of solid learning in Divinity of sound or orthodox principles."<sup>22</sup> It was the word orthodox that was going to be used by both sides in the battle to find a replacement for the position. Pearson was attempting to insist that the new professor must be as orthodox in his belief as Hollis had been. The more liberal of the Board of Overseers, of course, insisted this was unnecessary for the position. Pearson continued to filibuster at the meetings, and the meetings continued to be fruitless.

Two candidates were being mentioned for the professorship vacancy. Henry Ware from Hingham was a liberal and Reverend Jesse

---

<sup>21</sup> Wright, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy Essays on American Unitarian History*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), 13.

Appleton of New Hampshire a moderate. The death of Joseph Willard left a second vacancy which would have allowed for the compromise of one man for each of the two positions. Still Pearson objected because he wanted the job of president for himself.

The compromise failed and the final vote was strictly along the lines of each committee members views – orthodox or liberal. Ware received four votes, enough to give him the professorship.

When it came time to vote on the presidency of the college, Pearson still was uncompromising. He would hear of no one but an orthodox man for the post. Pearson was not popular among the students and faculty at Harvard. He was considered overbearing and pompous, and was accused by students of having favorites in his classes. After the election of Ware, it became apparent even to him that the job of president of the college would not be his. He resigned in protest, and after some discussion, his resignation was accepted by a committee of the Board of Overseers. Pearson went for a time to the newly established Theological School at Andover, but was not happy there either. He eventually retired into obscurity.

Jedidiah Morse, on the other hand, did not become obscure at all. He had achieved a victory of sorts by forcing the decision over Ware's appointment to be seen as a liberal versus orthodox question. Thus began a conflict that was to continue for many years. Both sides attacked and counter attacked through the use of tracts and pamphlets. "The next

phase might be called the Tracterian period."<sup>23</sup> During this period the establishment of two groups, formal and informal, of Congregationalists served two begin the split that soon became irreparable.

Jedidiah Morse worked to make certain that the split became a permanent one. "Morse accomplished this end, not by theological argument but by constructing institutions in which Calvinists of various stripes would be brought into closer interaction with one another, while intercourse among Calvinists and Arminians (Liberal Christians) would be discouraged. He exploited networks of ministers and laity based in outlying towns, with limited connection to the Boston elite."<sup>24</sup>

Morse worked on two groups of his connections, those from Yale and others from Andover. He had formed them into the Massachusetts Missionary Society in 1799. None of the leading elite, meaning liberal, ministers were members.

"The election of Henry Ware in 1805 was a signal to Morse that the Boston elite was in firm control of Harvard College."<sup>25</sup> Morse no longer considered Harvard a fit place to educate future orthodox ministers. Using his influence with both groups of Calvinists, he was instrumental in founding Andover Theological Seminary in 1808.

The split became more and more firmly entrenched with the founding of a variety of organizations by both groups. Morse started the *Panoplist* and the liberals began the *Monthly Anthology*. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was begun in 1803 by the conservatives. The

---

<sup>23</sup> Atkins and Fagley, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Unitarian Controversy*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Wright, 55.

liberals in turn founded The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Piety, and Charity. Harvard College was deemed insufficient for training new liberal ministers, and Harvard Divinity School was founded. Morse felt very strongly that there should be no interaction between the two factions, no fellowship or pulpit exchanges. This was a reaction to what was happening, however, not a cause of the split. It is difficult to say exactly when the split went beyond the point of repair or who was most important in reacting to whom.

“It is commonly asserted that when the churches of the Standing Order in Massachusetts divided into two bodies in the course of the Unitarian Controversy, the liberals claimed a disproportionate share of the prominent merchants, lawyers, and men of affairs of their community.” Thus Winthrop Hudson called Unitarianism “the faith of the well-to-do, urban New Englanders,” while Merle Curti spoke of the rationalistic faith of early Unitarians as satisfying “the upper classes who were its principle but by no means only adherents.” James Truslow Adams wrote that Unitarianism “became the religion of all the higher social circles of Massachusetts and Calvinism occupied the lower social position of dissent.”<sup>26</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe was also reported as saying that all the literary men were Unitarians.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the fact that the elite became Unitarians was to the detriment of the new organization. The elite in Boston were indeed a select group, a small select group. Liberal theology and society did not seem to appeal to the people on the street. Having a limited appeal is necessarily going

---

<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Unitarian Controversy*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, 37.



to also limit size. Perhaps the Liberals preferred it that way. A small group is easier to control and also to dominate. "Within the span of one generation, from 1805 to 1835, approximately 125 churches of the Massachusetts Standing Order, most of them in the Eastern part of the state, became Unitarian. There was controversy and schism in a number of well-publicized cases, but in many more instances the churches became liberal through a gradual drift of opinion."<sup>28</sup> This is not a large group of people. One hundred twenty-five churches is a large number of buildings, but eastern Massachusetts is not a large area, and each of these churches did not have a huge congregation. It should also be noted that not all of the congregation changed its thinking each time a church was relabeled as Unitarian. Some of the members of these churches left them and sought more conservative thinking elsewhere. These churches gradually changed their belief in conservative, orthodox, Trinitarianism to Unitarian theology. What exactly was it that was so different? What are the beliefs that the Liberals adopted?

In the Great Public Meeting in Edinburgh some of these beliefs are recorded. "There is one self-existent God the Father: who is God alone; to the entire exclusion of the alleged Proper Deity of the Word." The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is (even in his highest capacity, nature or condition) a Created Being, deriving his existence, wisdom, power, and authority from the Father; and inferior to him in these and all other attributes.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *Unitarian Controversy*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> John Anderson, "Report of the Great Public Meeting Held in the Assembly Rooms," Edinburgh, 1839, II II.

The Nicene Creed is a pure invention of man according to David Felt in 1827. "Unitarians believe in the revelation of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus is the messiah sent by God who inspired him with divine wisdom to lay the foundation for the kingdom of God. We believe the New Testament is what foundational faith rests on. It was written by contemporaries of Jesus, given as a gift from God."<sup>30</sup>

Felt goes on to tell us that the Trinity is rejected as essentially incredible and without foundation in Scripture. Matthew's doctrine of baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost doesn't prove he was Trinitarian, and actually he was hostile to it. Matthew 28: 19 is a text that has been abandoned by honest intelligent thinkers as a forgery. Miraculous powers could be given to anyone so Jesus' miracles do not prove His divinity. "1 John: 7... This passage is usually quoted as 1 John v. 7, but, so far as authority is concerned, *the Father of lies* may dispute claim to it with the venerable Apostle, and must be allowed to have a preferable title; for *if knowingly introduced*, a more gross, impudent, and baseless forgery was never executed or attempted."<sup>31</sup>

It is, of course, difficult to say what Unitarians profess because there is a possibility to hold widely differing views within a Unitarian Congregation. "All Unitarians believe that Jesus was one with God, – *in a spiritual sense*; the sense in which he prayed (John xvii. 21-23) that all who shall be brought to believe on him might become one with him and the Father. Many Unitarians are Arians, that is, they believe that Jesus pre-existed; that he was an archangel, next in dignity to the Most High.... Other

---

<sup>30</sup> David Felt, *The Unitarian, No. I, II, and III*, (New York: November, 1827).

<sup>31</sup> Anderson.

Unitarians, probably the larger part of them, believe that he was a man supernaturally born of his mother only, in accordance with the accounts given by Matthew and Luke. But there are many of our denomination who believe, as I do, that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary; that the accounts prefixed to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, inconsistent with each other, are not genuine, but were taken from the thousand marvelous stories which were invented in the second and third centuries of the Christian era to magnify, in the eyes of the ignorant and credulous, the founder of the new religion, and do away the reproach of his crucifixion.”<sup>32</sup>

Much of the Unitarian literature shows a great reliance on oneself, and one’s thoughts. Scientific practices, reading, discussion of ‘Great Truths’, and reinterpretation of Scriptures often prevail. It is easy to see why Morse was so concerned. He did overreact hugely it is true. It seems to me, however, that any Scripturally well-versed Christian would be very uncomfortable with the writings that came from the pamphlets and treatises of the time. It is similar, in a way, to the Book of Mormon. The Unitarians did not add a book or rewrite the Bible as Thomas Jefferson did, but if they really believe in the interpretations of Scripture put forth here, they do not seem able to carry the title Christians.

The times were conducive to deep thoughts and discussions. The area of Boston was small and filled with educated, exciting people. Many changes had occurred during the eighteenth century to make people question beliefs they had thought were solid. To rearrange the Bible to suit one’s thinking, to deny the Divinity of Christ as written, to feel that

---

<sup>32</sup> Rev. Samuel J. May, *What Do Unitarians Believe?* (Boston: American Unitarian Association), 6.

human thought is the highest type of achievement, all these seem to me to be a blind overweening reaction to a world that was rapidly changing and could not be controlled as people once thought it could. The Unitarian split was pushed into prominence, perhaps causing a group to go public that would have preferred not to, by Jedidiah Morse after the election of Henry Ware. But Jedidiah Morse was not the cause of the split. In a way he forced the liberals to acknowledge what was happening within their ranks, but he did not cause them to abandon their Christology. A reaction to the Great Awakening would be natural for an intellectual who disagreed with the need for physical reaction to declare one's beliefs. One should not be surprised at a group breaking away from the overly strict Calvinism that once prevailed, predestination seems strange to many of us now. It does seem, however, that the Unitarians "threw out the proverbial baby with the bath water."

In a speech delivered at an ordination William Ellery Channing attempted to explain the Unitarian use of reason in interpreting Scripture. "We grant, that the passions continually, and sometimes fatally, disturb the rational faculty in its inquiries into revelation. The ambitious contrive to find doctrines in the Bible, which favor their love of dominion. The timid and rejected discover there a gloomy system, and the mystical and fanatical, a visionary theology."<sup>33</sup> Channing goes on to discuss how the vicious and the falsely refined can also find verses to support their positions. What he does not mention is how those who are looking for proof that Christ is not part of a Triune God twist the Scripture in exactly the same way.

---

<sup>33</sup> William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity", delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in the First Independent Church of Baltimore, May 5, 1819.

“The essence of Unitarianism is *self-inquiry, self-conviction.*”<sup>34</sup> (italics mine). The essence of Christianity is a belief in Christ, the redeeming power of His life and death as the Son of God. As Christians we see Christ as one part of the Trinity, one equal part of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do not need scientific proof, we have faith.

The cause of the split of Unitarians from Congregationalism is men who felt they knew more and understood better than what was being taught. In many cases they were heading in the correct direction as far as theology is concerned. When they decided to rely on themselves and their own thinking, however, they became less than Christians. They lost an essential necessary to the Christian faith. They no longer had a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>34</sup> Felt, vol. iii, 81.

## Sources Consulted

Anderson, John. "Report of the Great Public Meeting Held in the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh." Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Printing and Publishing Company, 1839.

Atkins, Gaius Glenn, and Frederick L. Fagley. History of American Congregationalism. Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942.

Britannica.com. "Unitarianism and Universalism online.

Brauer, Jerald C. Protestantism in America. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953.

Clarke, James Freeman. Modern Unitarianism Essays and Sermons. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1886.

Cooke, George Willis. Unitarianism in America. Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902.

Emerton, Ephraim. Unitarian Thought. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911.

Felt, David. "The Unitarian" Nos. I & II & III. November 1827, New York.

"A Liberal Religious Heritage," Unitarian & Universalist Foundations in Europe, America, & Elsewhere. online.

Howe, Daniel Walker. The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Tapp, Robert B. Religion Among the Unitarian Universalists. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.

"Unitarianism," Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2000.

Von Rohr, John. The Shaping of American Congregationalism 1620-1957.

Wilson, John. Unitarian Principles Confirmed by Trinitarian Testimonies. Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1855.

Wright, Conrad. The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America. Boston: Starr King Press, 1955.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Liberal Christians. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.