



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Outed as a Unitarian

Clay Nelson © 29 May 2022

No one was more surprised than I when moving to New Zealand that I would put my Anglican collar back on after eight years with the American Unitarian Universalists. I did impose one condition on myself before doing so — I would no longer dance around my progressive religious views in the pulpit.

Traditionalists and conservatives be damned. It was time to stand up for my beliefs. Yet a lot had changed. My sermons were not just on a table at the back of the church gathering dust but on the Internet for all to see. They still are and may always be. I think of them as my afterlife. Taking a position at St Matthew-in-the-city had already made me suspect in the eyes of traditionalists and conservatives. I was about as popular as a skunk at a garden party after my first billboard to go viral globally drew attention to my views on TV, radio, the press and blogs. My notoriety gained me few friends throughout the country. My hate mail and death threats increased dramatically. I gained no popularity when one of my conservative colleagues did some deep dumpster diving on the Internet, discovered my Unitarian connections and outed me on his blog.

I presume he hoped to squash me and my progressive heresies before I could infect his beloved faith, but he forgot two things. First, few in New Zealand know what a Unitarian is. Second, he thought publicly shaming me by outing me was well-deserved. He was right about the first. I was a Unitarian in an Anglican collar (hardly the first, I might add). But he couldn't have been more wrong about the second. Unitarianism validated my ever-evolving theological perspective. I found hope in a faith community willing to take risks to make the world better. I felt no shame, just liberation.

One of the things I love about history is how the stories get repeated, whether you remember them or not. My outing is a story that I first found told in what Meg Barnhouse described in a sermon as the battle for Harvard. It is an account of the birth of American Unitarianism as an organised denomination. It took place in 1805 in the hallowed halls of Harvard University.

In 1803 the man who had been the Hollis Professor of Divinity died, leaving the post open. The Divinity professor trained ministers, there being no Divinity

School before this. At Harvard, the Hollis Professor of Divinity had been a moderate Calvinist.

John Calvin, in the 1550s, revived the theological ideas of Augustine of Hippo, who was a bishop in the early 400s. "TULIP" is the mnemonic device by which students remember Calvinist beliefs:

- T Total depravity of human nature
- U Unconditional election of the saints
- L Limited atonement
- I Irresistible grace of God
- P Perseverance of the saints

Total depravity of human nature: the belief that humans are bent, and we choose to do destructive things more easily than we choose to do good. We are inclined to choose selfishly. It is mainly fear of punishment that keeps us on the straight and narrow.

Unconditional election of the saints: God chose to save some from the beginning of time. It follows that those not selected were damned to eternal punishment.

Limited atonement: Jesus died to save only the chosen, NOT those who weren't.

Irresistible grace of God: If God chooses you to be among the saved, you will be because God wills it.

Perseverance of the saints: Once saved, always saved. You can struggle, but God will not let you go.

That is traditional Calvinism. For a hundred years in New England, that was the only flavour of Christianity taught in churches. That is what counted as orthodoxy — right belief. The society in New England was pretty homogeneous. Most of the citizens of Massachusetts were Congregational Calvinists and did not object that tax money paid their ministers' salaries. This arrangement was called the Standing Order, and it had been in effect since the Puritans.

By 1805, Congregational ministers varied in their theology. Some were strict Calvinists, and others were more moderate Calvinists. Some had become

Liberals. Liberals did not believe or preach the doctrines of Calvinism. They had begun to think that God had created good human beings. They did not see God as demanding blood to forgive sins. Jesus saved us by his teachings and awakening the mind and heart, not by his death on the cross.

Entering the battle for Harvard came a strict Calvinist named Jedediah Morse, a new arrival to Massachusetts. He was amazed that the Liberals and Calvinists got along so well together. He thought ministers should take a stand, be counted and be labelled by where they stood on TULIP. Morse began hinting that the Liberals were tainted with the Unitarianism preached in England. Those Unitarians were preaching that Jesus was just a man, possessing no divinity. Morse was troubled that the lack of controversy came from differences not being voiced or pointed out. People were being too polite, and it was getting in the way of knowing who was who. Who could be trusted to preach correct doctrine, and who could not.

Before the controversy of 1805, most Liberal preachers avoided preaching their opposition to Calvinist theology from the pulpit. To avoid controversy and keep peace in the congregations, they did what many Liberal preachers do today, and I have done in the past. They just preached around the objectionable doctrines, choosing to preach instead about social responsibility, ethical behaviour, and God's loving-kindness. At the ministerial meetings, they avoided speaking of their Liberal beliefs. No one claimed they were strict, moderate or liberal. The ministers in the association were in the habit of pulpit exchanges. A minister would be in his own pulpit about half the time. For the other half, he would preach at other churches. It granted relief to the congregations. They heard different voices and other points of view. It also provided relief to the ministers, who had to write fewer sermons since they could repeat their better ones when they visited another pulpit. The Standing Order of tax-supported worship and the pulpit exchanges were what gave what happened at Harvard the importance it had.

The Hollis professor who died and left his Chair vacant was a moderate and well respected Calvinist. He got along with both liberals and conservatives.

Here's where academic politics come into the story. The President of Harvard procrastinated in suggesting a candidate because the most obvious candidate was a Liberal Boston minister named Henry Ware, and the President was a Calvinist. He didn't want the controversy. The President just never brought up the subject of a replacement at meetings of the Harvard Corporation, and for

two years, the post was left vacant. By 1805, due to growing pressure, they had to find a candidate soon. The President chose to exit the fray by dying.

A professor named Eliphalet Pearson took over the acting Presidency and was widely understood to want the permanent job very badly. People at the time characterised him as an “ultra-Liberal before the President’s death, and a staunch Calvinist after”.

Pearson and five other men made up the Corporation that governed the university. There was one other staunch Calvinist, two liberals, and two moderates. The selection process began with each man in the Corporation writing down two names. The two Calvinists each wrote down names of two Calvinist candidates, the two Liberals each wrote down the names of two Liberal candidates, and the two Moderates each wrote down the names of one Calvinist candidate and one Liberal candidate. The choice came down to two: a moderate Calvinist and Henry Ware. Finally, several months later, Henry Ware was elected by one vote. There was no candidate settled on for President.

The appointment then had to be okayed by the Board of Overseers of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Calvinists were understandably distressed that the professor of Divinity would not be orthodox, fearing all the ministers that would come out of Harvard would now be Unitarian.

The only point open for discussion was whether Ware fit the stipulations of the Hollis grant. Jedediah Morse, an ally of Eliphalet Pearson, saw this as an opportunity to show the people how sneaky and deceitful the Liberals were, not wanting to declare their position. Here was a chance to cross-examine and bring their Unitarianism to light. With 45 of the 47 members of the Board present, he attacked. What procedure had the Corporation followed to satisfy itself that Ware’s views were in accord with the terms of Thomas Hollis’s gift? Hollis had written that the professor should be “a man of solid learning in divinity, of sound and orthodox principles”. This man doesn’t fit! He will not adhere to the Calvinist Westminster Confession. Hollis was not a Unitarian, and he would NEVER have countenanced the election of a man who had departed from sound doctrine. The Liberals’ position was that Hollis, as a Baptist, had already departed from the Westminster Confession, whose doctrines the Baptists did not believe. Baptists believed in Jesus’ death being for everyone. Hollis himself had written that the only article of belief to be required of his professor should be that “the Bible was the only and most perfect rule for faith and practice, and that it should be interpreted “according to the best light that

God shall give him. The election of Ware was no breach of trust, as Morse and Pearson were accusing, but was in keeping with Hollis's intent. Ware was elected.

Within a matter of weeks, Morse had written and published a pamphlet complaining about the election of Ware. When Harvard chose another Liberal to be President, Eliphalet Pearson resigned, and within three years Harvard Divinity School was founded.

At Morse's urging, the ministers in the Standing Order started organising. Trinitarian orthodox congregations established their own associations, refusing to exchange pulpits with liberals, accusing them of "Unitarianism." Jedediah Morse, in 1815, published a pamphlet called "American Unitarianism", accusing the liberals of, well, believing what they did believe. The Standing Order broke down as the Congregational churches split into Orthodox Trinitarian and Liberal churches. The liberals increasingly felt pressure to defend themselves against charges of English Unitarianism since they held a higher view of Jesus as saviour than the English Unitarians. "Unitarian" did, however, describe their view of the Oneness of God, and finally, in 1819, in Baltimore, William Ellery Channing preached the sermon that was the manifesto of American Unitarianism. He asked why God would create us with free will and then punish us for using it. Why he, as a supposedly loving father, would choose some of his children to go to eternal damnation. Weren't his listeners all better parents than that? Why should we be better parents than God?

Our task from the beginning has been to define ourselves other than as against different faith perspectives. We still struggle with that. Many Unitarian Universalists are most comfortable saying what we DON'T believe. At the beginning of our movement, the orthodox "outed" us with their attacks. We still have a legacy of hiding, not wanting to make a fuss, and not being right out there with our faith.

Shortly we will hold our Annual General Meeting. It is an excellent time to fuss about what we hold essential to our faith. We can only hope to be outed and proud of it.

No Meditation / Conversation Starter this week, we held our AGM instead.