



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Have the Seven Principles passed their use-by date?

Clay Nelson © 16th April 2023

Last week we explored [the many challenges of being a living tradition](#), the biggest being finding a consensus when we don't have a creed, holy book of revelation or ecclesiastical authority.

This morning our focus is on the [Seven Principles](#). How they came to be? Their role in our faith. Have they passed their use by date?

In a 2006 *UU World* editorial entitled "[How the UU Principles and Purposes were Adopted](#)", Warren Ross had this to say about the problem:

*The importance of our ability to express a set of shared core beliefs was well described by the Rev. Eugene Pickett when he assumed the UUA presidency in 1979. Referring to the problems facing the denomination, Pickett said, "The deeper malaise lies in our confusion as to what word we have to spread. The old watchwords of liberalism—freedom, reason, tolerance—worthy though they may be, are simply not catching the imagination of the contemporary world. They describe a process for approaching the religious depths, but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves. If we are ever to speak to a new age, we must supplement our seeking with some profound religious finds."*

To keep the timeline straight, Pickett expressed his frustration 18 years after the merger of Unitarians and Universalists and five years before a solution was offered in the Six Principles and six sources. Yes, it was only six. The seventh was not adopted until nine years later.

I'm sure all seven principles just roll off your tongue, but as a reminder, here they are:

*We desire openly to declare our belief as a denomination that God, moved by his own love, did raise up Jesus to aid in our*

*redemption from sin, did by him pour a fresh flood of purifying life through the withered veins of humanity and along the corrupted channels of the world, and is, by his religion, forever sweeping the nations with regenerating gales from heaven, and visiting the hearts of men with celestial solicitations. We receive the teachings of Christ, separated from all foreign admixtures and later accretions, as infallible truth from God.*

Oops. Wrong Principles. These were the stated Principles of Unitarians in 1853.

Let me try again:

*Whereas the great opportunities and demands for Christian labour and consecration at this time increase our sense of the obligations of all disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to prove their faith by self-denial and by the devotion of their lives and possessions to the service of God and the building up of the Kingdom of his Son. Therefore, the Christian churches of the Unitarian faith here assembled unite themselves in a common body.*

Bloody hell. I still don't have it right. This was the proclamation from a later set of Unitarian principles, those from the Unitarian Covenant of 1865 at the end of the Civil War.

Not one to give up, let me try again:

*The essential principles of the Universalist faith are these: The Universal Fatherhood of God; the spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ; the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God; the certainty of just retribution for sin; and the final harmony of all souls with God.*

You guessed it. Still missing the mark, as does this, the five principles proclaimed by Universalists in 1899:

*The Universal Fatherhood of God; the spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ; the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God; the certainty of just retribution for sin; the final harmony of all souls with God.*

Being the bright people you are, I'm sure you get the point. Since 1790, Unitarians and Universalists sought to find a consensus around their

beliefs. These examples are just a sampling. There were heaps of attempts. They were finally on the right path when the two merged in 1961:

*The members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:*

- 1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of religious fellowship;*
- 2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man;*
- 3. To affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;*
- 4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice, and peace;*
- 5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;*
- 6. To encourage cooperation with men of goodwill of all faiths in every land.*

*[The UUA's original Principles (1961) | UU World Magazine.*

*<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uuas-original-principles-1961>]*

Not bad, but the precise wording nearly derailed the merger at the time. The contention centred on such phrases as “love to God and love to man” and a reference to “our Judeo-Christian heritage”. Compromise kicked the can further down the road.

The 2005 Commission on Appraisal finally acknowledged why the issue had been so contentious and remained so:

*[There] is a tendency to uncritically embrace a host of non-Christian faiths while the Christianity from which our religious tradition springs is subjected to abuse and scorn:*

*What is “in,” and also unobjectionable (from the standpoint of many unreconciled former Christians), is anything Eastern or “earthy” in nature. Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American spirituality, and pagan earth-centred religions have been identified as trendy, cool, and acceptable among UUs.*

*The problem with this is that the fashionability of these “exotic” religions is frequently defined in opposition to Christianity. The*

*exotic religions are given great latitude and not always critically examined, while any use of Christian sources in UU churches is minutely scrutinized. In truth, there is as much wisdom and insight in Jewish and Christian sources as there is in other, more fashionable traditions. The reality is that all religions have their flaws and have been historically misused.*

By the time Pickett lamented that the founding principles no longer met the need, women had already set us on a meandering path to forming our present Principles. It was the time of second-wave feminism, and women were offended by the noninclusive language in the 1961 Principles. I went through these battles in the Episcopal Church and can testify to how vehemently the patriarchy resisted this move. We may think today it wasn't a big deal whether we spoke of mankind instead of humankind, but I assure you it was. The patriarchy saw it. This change would result in men losing their dominance of the ordained ministry to women in many religions and certainly in mainline Christianity and Unitarian Universalism. Given the attachment to the sexist language of so many men and not a few women, it was prescient of UUA President Pickett to sense the coming of this wave. As he once told a UU women's gathering, *"You are changing the situation of women within our denomination, and, in so doing, you are opening up for all of us new ways of understanding and perceiving women and, we hope, men as well."*

By 1981 there was a growing demand for new principles by a group of protesting ministers. They asked for a "strong" statement of Principles with religious integrity, intellectual coherence, and literary quality."

A committee reflecting UU diversity was charged with developing a draft of new principles. Walter Jones, the chair of the committee, recalls:

*One committee member, Harry Hoehler, came up with a solution to the problem that had created controversy both at the 1960 meetings and again in 1981: whether to refer to the deity and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hoehler suggested dividing the statement into two parts: first, the Seven Principles, followed by references to five "living traditions we share." (A sixth tradition, earth-centred religions, was added to the statement in 1995.) No one objected to language about the "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love" when it appeared as part of a summary of historical influences on UUism.*

Another change Jones considers significant is this:

*The switch from “the free and disciplined search for truth” in the 1961 statement to the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” suggests that the search takes place in community. Jones also considers notable the adjective “inherent,” in place of “supreme,” to qualify the worth of every person, since it recognizes that people’s inner potential can be “hidden” or rejected. It is unlikely that the history of religion provides any comparable example of such intentional and committed use of inclusive, non-hierarchical processes to produce a guiding statement.*

After 15 years, Jones did not think the Seven Principles were for all ages. He had this to say:

*We should not be surprised at some restiveness. On the one hand, some are uneasy with what they see as a kind of creeping creedalism in the way we use the Principles. On the other, there is a perception of incompleteness, with important, arguably necessary empowering assumptions about cosmic reality and our particular place in it that they leave unsaid. Still others, he says, are dissatisfied with what they see as an excessive emphasis on the individual, so that the creative nature of community and interdependence are only tardily and inadequately acknowledged.*

*Nonetheless, no one at the moment is suggesting any drastic revisions. And yet the commitment to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” as the Fourth Principle puts it, carries the seeds of its own obsolescence. Just consider: well into the 20th century, our Unitarian predecessors used to proclaim and teach their children that we believe in “The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever.” Quite apart from the fact that we tend not to use so many capital letters, we would today have difficulty saying those words without embarrassment and lots of “sic-ness.” Yet the people who did say them were just as intelligent, as in tune with their times, and as committed to reason and free-thinking as we are. In 2020 (when everyone presumably will have perfect vision), our current Principles and Purposes may also be perceived to have inadequacies that demand radical rewriting. And therein lies our genius. It’s a process that is rightly called renewal or regeneration.*

*And that is what has not changed and, let us hope, will remain unchanged 20 or even 100 years from now.*

I propose that that time is now. Next week we will look at what is being proposed by the Commission on Appraisal.

### **Meditation / Discussion groups**

If you could not use the Seven Principles, how would you describe UU beliefs to someone who had never heard of us before?

Small groups: begin by introducing yourself and why you are here today.