

What Unitarian Universalists Are Taught About Jesus Christ

by John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

Unitarian Universalists have almost as many views of Jesus Christ as are imaginable, but most of them see Him as a good man with good teachings, not so different from the good and wise men in all ages. There is one consensus about Christ, however, which seems to find universal Unitarian Universalist [UU] agreement: He is not an atoning Savior. UU minister Waldeman Argow declares of UU's: "They do not regard him as a supernatural creature, the literal son of God who was miraculously sent to earth as part of an involved plan for the salvation of human souls."¹ In fact, Argow maintains incorrectly that to accept the biblical portrait (which incidentally, teaches both His full humanity and His undiminished deity), is to make Him irrelevant, for then, supposedly, He is a God that man cannot relate to.

But if, as some early Christians began to do, you take a heathen view, and make him a God, the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense—much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit; his love no feeling; his cross no burden; his agony no pain. His death is an illusion; his resurrection but a show.²

(Theodore Parker, who originally made the above statement at his famous May 19, 1841, Boston lecture, surprisingly enough, began his sermon by quoting Luke 21:33. This is where Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away"!) For most UU's today Jesus' words have passed away and have little if any relevance.

While UU's of the religious persuasion claim to respect and revere Jesus, it is principally a Jesus of their own making. They therefore discard those historical events in the life of Christ which they dislike (particularly the miracles), even while claiming they are "much more impressed by and committed to the historical Jesus than by, or to the theological Christ," as if the two ideas could in any sense be separated.³

Certainly, responsible recent biblical scholarship attempts no such arbitrary division. The "theological" Christ is the historical Christ if we are giving any deference at all to Scripture or facts of history.

At best, for UU's, Jesus is an example of one who had faith in humanity, but never the object of faith for humanity (John 3:16) or a revealer of the one true God (John 17:3). From "the babe in the manger legend" to the "symbolism as poetry" of the resurrection, the life of the *biblical* Jesus is either rejected or ridiculed.

Even as far back as 1867 (and before), Jesus Christ was being assaulted by Unitarianism. The "Fifty Affirmations of Free Religion" of the Unitarian Free Religious Association (1867) stated in point 34 their desire that "the completion of the religious protest against authority must be the extinction of faith in the Christian Confession [i.e., here, the belief that Jesus was the Messiah]."⁴

By capitulating to and endorsing the highly dubious methods and findings of higher criticism (e.g., The Jesus Seminar), most UU ministers and laymen today believe they can know little or nothing of the "real" Jesus. They support these methods despite a flood of apologetic material refuting the biases and errors of such liberal scholarship. Perhaps with modern man in general today we could say the average UU is not really interested in the historic evidence for the biblical portrait, but that they believe what they want to believe, because it allows them to live as they want. We again find a refreshing frankness, at least occasionally:

I have my own picture of Jesus, a fictional picture of course, but as valid for me as any of the other fictional pictures. It is based on descriptions and narratives in the Gospels and I admit I have taken only those things that I want for my picture and have ignored those things I do not want.⁵

To reject the deity of Christ, one must also logically reject every facet of it, from predictive prophecy (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2) to incarnation (Phil. 2:1-10) to virgin birth, miracles, atonement, resurrection and ascension; other words one must reject the totality of His person and mission. Thus the birth of Christ is nothing special: "many UU's hold in reverence the event of Jesus' birth, although many more would say that not only his birth but that of every child is holy."⁶

Neither is His incarnation unique. The most influential English Unitarian, James Martineau (1805-1900), stated what has come to be a common belief among UU's: "The incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of Man universally."⁷ Neither is the Person of Jesus unique: "I admire the spiritual force and ethical direction of the Nazarene, but he was neither perfect nor infallible. He is not to be worshipped."⁸ This same minister declares, "I accept Jesus as my Christ," and states he hopes to be "true to his (Jesus Christ's) discipleship."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, biblical antagonist and leader of the transcendentalist movement, spent two years in the Unitarian ministry. His famous July 15, 1838, "Harvard Divinity School Address" reflects the views of a majority of modern UU's: "Historic Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion.... It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus."⁹

The following statements are representative examples of various UU opinions

about Christ:

A rather ordinary human being.¹⁰

Jesus of Nazareth is regarded not as a supernatural being but as a pre-eminently inspired and noble religious leader.¹¹

In the providence of God, Jesus is but one of mankind's Christs—all times and cultures have their anointed suffering servants.¹²

Jesus began his ministry with a sense of inadequacy. He went to the Jordan to be cleansed for he knew his imperfection.¹³ (Few UU's have seen Christ as sinless. Writers such as James Reilly contended that because Christ was a man, he was guilty of the sin of Adam.¹⁴)

We do not seek to belittle Jesus but to exalt him *as the great human* he was.... We do not dogmatize on his nature.¹⁵

Each person may imagine the historical Jesus as he wishes, and within the broad limitations of scholarship and credibility, he will be as nearly right about the matter as anyone else—probably not very nearly right.... The important aspect... is not the historical Jesus.... Matthew, Mark, Luke and John put into their pictures of Jesus what they needed to have there in order to make him what they believed him to be, the supreme human who was also God.... I find it exhilarating to believe that the perfection we have poured into the figure of Jesus; has come from... human imagination, and ethical aspiration. Today it is a greater perfection than it was for the gospel writers.... I'm for a better and better Jesus, born from the aspiring heart of humanity.¹⁶

Finally, UU minister and professor Jack Mendelsohn repeats the long discredited "Paul invented Jesus" view for which there was never even a shred of evidence:

Most of us believe that on the basis of the evidence available to us, Jesus, at most, thought of himself as the Jewish Messiah. It was later followers and interpreters, like the Apostle Paul, who transformed Jesus into a Christian Savior atoning to God for the sins of mankind.

Thus Mendelsohn claims that the deity of Christ and the Trinity were never believed in by Christians until officially formulated at the Nicean council in 325 AD: "The deity of Jesus thus became the official orthodoxy of Christian religion."¹⁷ This too, is proven incorrect by looking at numerous early church Fathers who unequivocally defended Christ's deity.

Paul could hardly have invented a "new Jesus,"¹⁸ for He was initially an orthodox Pharisee who hated both Jesus and his followers. If anything, Paul wanted Jesus kept in the grave. Yet soon after the crucifixion he was proclaiming Jesus Christ as the resurrected Hebrew Messiah, Son of God, and atoning Savior (Acts 9:20-29; Gal. 1:9-2:16). Paul had the means and the ability to check his facts; he would not have endured a life of much suffering and then died for Christ unless he was convinced He was indeed the prophesied Messiah. Only a miracle could have transformed "Saul" into "Paul." The position of unbelief is the one which

must present some valid evidence for its views, for the clear weight of the evidence favors Paul's position, one that is in complete harmony with the teachings of the Jesus of the Gospels. Thus, Christ himself was well aware he was the Messiah and that He was to be the One making atonement for the sins of the world (Matt. 20:28; Jn. 10:17; Matt. 16:15-27; Jn. 1:29; 4:25-26, 10:33, 11:25, etc.).

He also knew He was deity (Jn. 5:18; 10:30), and it is a fact that the earliest Christians believed in the deity of Christ and the Trinity. Nicea did not "invent" the Trinity; it simply recognized "officially" the already commonly accepted Christian beliefs. In fact, so many "unitarian" heresies were spreading that it was necessary and wise to officially declare biblical doctrines as a standard measure.

It is, of course, always simple to maintain a religious belief of one's choosing: objectively documenting it is another story.

Notes:

- ¹ Waldeman Atgow, "Unitarian Universalism: Some Questions Answered," *UUA pamphlet*, p. 6.
- ² Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Park*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 137.
- ³ Argow, op cit., p. 6.
- ⁴ David Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 123.
- ⁵ Gilbert Phillips in Brandock Lovely (ed.), "Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus," pp. 7-8, *UUA pamphlet*.
- ⁶ H. Frost, "Unitarian Universalist Views of Christmas," *UUA pamphlet*.
- ⁷ Quoted by Richard Fewkes, in Brandock Lovely (ed), op cit., *UUA pamphlet*, p. 4; cf. Parke, op cit., pp. 72-76.
- ⁸ Ronald Mazur, "Viewpoints Within Unitarian Universalist Christianity," p. 5, *UUA pamphlet*.
- ⁹ Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, p. 99.
- ¹⁰ Harry Stokes, "Toward an Understanding of Christian Revelation," *UUCF pamphlet*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ John Booth, "Introducing Unitarian Universalism," p. 13, *UUA pamphlet*.
- ¹² R. Mazur, in Lovely (ed.), op cit., p. 5, *UUA pamphlet*.
- ¹³ G. A. Marshall, "Unitarian Universalists Believe," p. 4, *UUA pamphlet*.
- ¹⁴ Ernest Cassar, *Universalism in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 71.
- ¹⁵ G. N. Marshall, op cit., p. 4.
- ¹⁶ John MacKinnon, "Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus," p. 6, *UUA pamphlet*, May, 1976.
- ¹⁷ Jack Mendelsohn, *Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 43.
- ¹⁸ Machen's *The Origin of Paul's Religion* should be consulted for a thorough refutation of this idea.