

The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Christian

Rev. Stephen Kendrick

Nothing has ever been simple about Jesus. He confounded and confused people in his own time, and so it is no wonder Unitarian Universalists today are still wrestling with him, his message, and the tradition that claims him as a God. Yet I believe that people who are attracted to a place of free faith, spiritual seeking, and non-dogmatic religion have much to gain by grappling with the legacy of this teacher whose power and charisma seem undimmed from two thousand years ago. If anything, we are only beginning to understand the radical nature of his message.

I became a Unitarian Universalist because I would have made a very bad and quarrelsome Christian, but a pretty good religious liberal. This faith seems to claim the religious freedom that Jesus proclaimed and modeled. Jesus has taught me not to worship false idols, but rather the Divine Love that broods over all and lives inside each. This sort of love requires a tradition of openness, tolerance, freedom, and radical compassion. I became a UU precisely because I wanted to understand Jesus properly.

It is difficult to explain the label Unitarian Universalist Christian, yet it expresses the simple truth that Jesus and his life, message, charisma, and death haunt me. I find Jesus of Nazareth a compelling teacher, master poet, troublemaker, and insistent companion on the 'narrow path,' which is to say reality. Jesus is a spiritual genius, one of many we may choose to learn from, but still the one who most compels me to become the person I am meant to be.

I do not believe Jesus is the sole revelation of the Divine, and I do not know, but seriously doubt, if he was raised from the dead, or for that matter, ever meant to create something called Christianity. He came into his own troubled time proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is present. If words like Kingdom trouble us today, the better translation of what he said is, "The realm of Abba dwells among us now." When asked what the realm of God was, he did not spin metaphors about golden gates and heavenly vistas, but simply replied, "The Kingdom of God is within you." I believe it still is.

Many Unitarian Universalists choose to turn away from our Christian roots because of experiences we are very uneasy with or troubled by. While this reaction is understandable, it strikes me that it is not ultimately healthy for a religious movement or for any of us as individual searchers. Why? Ignoring Jesus' teaching and influence distorts our own past and heritage, which is deeply steeped in Christian origins. Furthermore, as Unitarian Universalists, we seek to build a religion based not on nay saying or rejection but rather on a positive, life-affirming message. And finally, Jesus is still worth hearing out. I can think of no more misunderstood and misjudged figure. I find him more compelling and inspiring as a human being who suffered and loved and claimed that no one is perfect but God than as the magical entity some of his most

devoted followers worship. It is equally ironic that this prophet of liberation and spiritual freedom, who said that the poor shall inherit the earth, is misunderstood by people attracted to the free faith and justice-seeking tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

The world around us is deeply influenced, for good or ill, by the spirit of Jesus. We need to be familiar with this insistent and determined character if we are to live and do our work in this world. We will benefit by wrestling with him, not ignoring or bypassing him. There is no doubt that Jesus is troubling, provocative, even annoying at times, but we Unitarian Universalists are known as troublemakers as well. We should understand this kind of personality!

My own story shows how truly complicated and subtle this whole question is. I became a Unitarian Universalist as a Southern convert to a classic humanistic church that was originally a lay-led fellowship, as was the first congregation I served as minister. I understand and appreciate the value members of our congregations place on reason and rationality. Yet when I served a year as a minister to ten struggling English Unitarian chapels, I was touched by the power of their ease with Christian words and concepts. Later, I served for over a decade a church with Universalist roots, and there I learned to appreciate that congregation's spiritual yearning and ability to connect to the best of our Christian past.

I now serve in a church where Ralph Waldo Emerson was once minister. I can't think of anyone who articulated the spiritual life above and beyond classic orthodoxy more expressively than Emerson did, but I also heed and well remember Emerson's evaluation: "Jesus belonged to the race of prophets. He saw with open eyes the mystery of the soul."

We talk a lot about diversity, and my experiences both as a minister and as a layperson have served to remind me of our truest diversity, the wide spectrum of belief and religious language still present among us. I have learned so much from each layer of my experience as a Unitarian Universalist, and I hope that we can preserve and protect all these influences and traditions among us.

Am I a classic Christian? Of course not. But Unitarian Universalists can and should have an expansive view of the nature of Jesus and his teachings. Labels are notoriously misleading and unforgiving things, but I'll take the consequences of being labeled in proclaiming that UU Christianity should still be part of who we are as a religious movement.

The reality is that no matter what religious source or tradition is most precious to us, it should not overwhelm the great freedom and invitation that Unitarian Universalism offers us. I do not want Unitarian Universalism to "become more Christian." My hope is that our faith, which we love, becomes as healthy, strong, and vibrant as it can be, and that we remain open and sensitive to the role that Jesus' message has played and can play in our becoming who we would be as Unitarian Universalists.

When Jesus was asked how best to follow him, he did not offer guidelines for creedal acceptance or ask for signatures on the dotted line. Rather, he asked, did you feed the hungry? Visit the widows? Go see the prisoners? If you did, you served him in the highest sense. These are still good questions, and how we answer tells us more about our relationship to Jesus today than any coffee-hour discussion or theological quarrel.

Mystery writer and journalist G. K. Chesterton was once asked what he thought about Christianity. He answered, “I think it would be a good idea.”

Truth is, I may not be a Unitarian Universalist Christian.

But if I work at it, someday I might be. The kinds of questions Jesus asked take a lifetime to answer.

About the Author: Rev. Stephen Kendrick is senior minister at First and Second Church in Boston, Massachusetts.

For Further Reading

Borg, Marcus. *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Buehrens, John A. *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Crossan, John Dominic. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Patterson, Stephen J. *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus & the Search for Meaning*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998.

Spong, James. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.

———. *A New Christianity for a New World*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

Wikstrom, Erik Walker. *Teacher, Guide, Companion: Rediscovering Jesus in a Secular World*. Boston: Skinner House, 2003.

Wright, Conrad, ed. *Three Prophets of Liberal Religion: Channing, Emerson, Parker*. Boston: Skinner House, 1996.

Purchase paper copies of this UUA Pamphlet Commission Publication from the [UUA Bookstore](#) for distribution or display