



The Unitarian Universalist
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HEAR, PRAY, AFFIRM

THREE ESSENTIALS FOR LIBERAL CHRISTIAN FORMATION

THE DECALOGUE • THE LORD'S PRAYER • THE APOSTLES' CREED

Sermons by Thomas D. Wintle

Dedicated to Suzanne and John

My family and my best friends

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FOREWORD

For some thirty years, Tom Wintle has edited and produced *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*. “The journal,” as UUCFers have often called it, has featured articles from some of the best Unitarian Universalist writers, thinkers and theologians today. Throughout the course of the journal’s history, editor Tom Wintle has succeeded in bringing to the Association a wide variety of resources from our common heritage, e.g., writings of and about Frederic Henry Hedge, Unitarian advocate of The Broad Church; the Unitarian catechisms and the Universalist creeds, materials long absent from most modern UU shelves and important for our theological self-understanding. The simple title of “Unitarian Prayers” in 1984 surprised some for whom that seemed an oxymoron, and yet this collection of prayers by James Martineau, Charles Edwards Park, Vivian Pomeroy, and Harry Murray Stokes, helped encourage the recovery and reclaiming of serious prayer by UUs, now something more common than a few decades ago. He has brought us the writings of current UU giants like Carl Scovel, George Kimmich Beach and David Parke, as well as a journal on prayer and the devotional life, the Hungarian catechism, a book on communion, the important “As Others See Us: Ecumenical Perspectives on Unitarian Universalism” and so many more. The publication of the 397-page “A Unitarian Universalist Christian Reader” in 1997 collected some of the best articles from the previous 50 years of the journal. In addition, the journal has featured the writings of seminarians and Unitarian Universalist ministerial study group papers, providing a rich text for theological contemplation and conversation.

The Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship is proud to offer this edition of the journal, featuring the writings of none other than the Reverend Dr. Thomas Wintle himself. Dr. Wintle served the First Church of Christ, Unitarian, in Lancaster, Massachusetts, for 20 years (1975-1995), and has been the Senior Minister of the First Parish Church in Weston, Massachusetts, for the past 15 years. Over the course of his ministry, he has accumulated a body of work and thought that represents not only liberal Christian thought, but provides for both laity and clergy alike, an opportunity for deep spiritual reflection. We hope that you find rich meaning in this new edition of the Journal.

With gratitude,
Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
President 2008–2010
Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship

INTRODUCTION

ON the chancel wall behind the communion table in King's Chapel, Boston, are tablets with the words from three teachings that have been central to Christian faith for centuries: the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. Similar tablets appear in a variety of English churches dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The clear implication is that these three are essential to Christian formation, belief, and practice. The sermons in this collection are intended to respond to these three teachings, offer some commentary, and commend their continued usefulness to us today.

The collection is titled "Hear, Pray, Affirm: Three Essentials of Liberal Christian Formation." By choosing this title I mean to suggest not only that the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed are core documents that are essential to liberal Christian formation but also that attending to them illustrates hearing, praying and affirming. While "Liberal Christian" may not be fashionable in some circles, still it is often helpful to distinguish the way the readers of this journal read the Bible from those evangelical Christians who see the scripture (to quote a participant in the Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue of the Massachusetts Council of Churches) as "a self-validating supernatural resource." Whether or not we are comfortable with the label "liberal," most mainline Christians tend to read the Bible as a human document, written by human beings reporting on their experiences of God, written in the styles and manners of their times. I suggest that God may use the Bible to speak through its words and stories to us today. It is a living document.

So what, then, is the obligation of the liberal Christian to the ancient texts, to the tradition? We need to "hear" it. We need to hear what our elders have passed down to us, not uncritically, not assuming the Bible is literal word of God, but respecting and listening and interpreting, and really hearing. The faith of our fathers and mothers is living still; we need not reinvent the wheel every generation. When we truly hear these texts, and they sink in, they can inspire, instruct, and transform us. As John B. Cobb, Jr., wrote in a collection of his sermons: "Unless it is the Christian gospel that makes us liberal, and not simply an erosion of faith, we are not in any serious sense liberal Christians" (*Liberal Christianity at the Crossroads*, Westminster, 1973). The sermons on the Ten Commandments, especially, are examples of how we can hear the ancient texts today.

Having heard the tradition, we are invited to pray it and pray about it: that means asking God to speak to us through these words, to inspire us to understand their meaning in our time, to instruct us how to be faithful in our world. Unitarian Henry Ware, Jr., in his *On the Formation of the Christian Character* (1831, reprinted in this journal, Summer, 1988) gave five "means of religious improvement": reading, meditation, prayer, preaching, and the Lord's Supper. For many liberals today, meditation and prayer are practically synonyms. The sermons on the Lord's Prayer are examples of hearing ancient texts and also cover four of Ware's improvements: reading, meditation, prayer and preaching.

Finally, formation calls for being able to affirm, to take a stand, take a leap of faith about important doctrines, to say “this we can believe.” Not to say “this we know,” but to say that here are affirmations of faith and hope, here I will say “yes.” What moves us beyond being what someone has called “the church of ‘have a nice day’” is the ability to say that great affirmative YES to Christian faith. My argument is that the ancient Apostles’ Creed is still accessible to today’s liberal Christians and could be our connection to what George Huntston Williams has called “the great church.” I know that Andrew Preston Peabody (1811-1893) is quoted as saying the Apostles’ Creed was “simply Unitarian” (in Ahlstrom/Carey, 4), but I am not sure how many other Unitarians, Universalists, or Unitarian Universalists have wrestled with the Apostles’ Creed. I hope more will.

THANK YOU

I enjoy writing sermon series. One sermon on the Lord’s Prayer just skims the surface; more allow one to go deeper, examine more closely, wrestle a bit, even read a few more books on the subject. A review of my preaching calendar over the past 35 years shows many such series in addition to those in this collection, with sermons on the Beatitudes, the Seven Deadly Sins, women of the Bible, even “ordinary virtues.” These were not always offered on sequential Sundays, but generally in one season, perhaps as “an occasional series.” While I spent some 20 years preaching on the ecumenical lectionary, and enjoyed the idea of listening to what scripture says to us rather than looking for texts that support what I wanted to say, there is also something to be said for taking a topic, a question, and asking what does scripture have to say about this? I commend both lectionary preaching and topical preaching.

I thank the congregations of The First Church of Christ, Unitarian, in Lancaster, Massachusetts (where I served 1975-1995) and The First Parish Church in Weston, Massachusetts (where I have served since 1995), for their willingness not only to listen to these sermons but to offer thoughtful responses and critiques. These churches, gathered in 1653 and 1698, have maintained a faith tradition and practice that the founding congregants would still recognize.

I thank our faithful Weston staff of Betsy Gibson and Millie Gaston for transcribing these electronic and even typewritten sermon notes.

I thank friends and colleagues for their advice: Kathleen Rolenz, Terry and Ellen Burke, David Parke, and Rich Simpson.

Some of these sermons were written so long ago that I don’t remember whose ideas I’ve borrowed, but I am sure that I’ve built upon others’ work. As I look at my bookcase, I see these books:

Ten Commandments:

John Barton & John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press), 2001

Shai Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism* (The Teaching Company), 2004
Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* (HarperSanFrancisco), 1995
Solomon Goldman, *The Ten Commandments* (University of Chicago Phoenix Books), 1963.
Eduard Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective* (Studies in Biblical Theology), 1968
Martin Noth, *Exodus, A Commentary* (Westminster), 1962.
John Shelby Spong, *Beyond Moralism: A Contemporary View of the Ten Commandments* (Harper & Row), 1986
Johann Jakob Stamm, Maurice Edward Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (Studies in Biblical Theology), 1967

The Lord's Prayer:

Nicholas Ayo, *The Lord's Prayer* (University of Notre Dame Press), 1992
William Barclay, *The Beatitudes & the Lord's Prayer for Everyman* (Harper & Row), 1964
James Freeman Clarke, *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, 1888 (Available on Google books)
Jan Milic Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer* (Eerdmans), 1990.
Daniel L. Migliore, ed., *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, (Eerdmans), 1993
Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1-13 (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament: 1a.* (InterVarsity Press), 2001

Apostles' Creed:

Sydney E. Ahlstrom & Jonathan S. Carey, eds., *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Wesleyan University Press), 1985
Nicolas Ayo, *Creed as Symbol* (University of Notre Dame Press), 1989
Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Fortress), 1978
Austin Farrer, *Lord I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer* (Cowley), 1989
Berard L. Marthaler, *The Creed* (Twenty-third Publications), 1987

My friend Terry Burke read this introduction as a draft and suggested a final line: "Let those who have ears hear."

Works for me.

– Thomas D. Wintle
May 16, 2010
The Seventh Sunday of Easter in Year C
Eighth Grade Recognition Sunday at
The First Parish Church in Weston, Massachusetts