

# Growing from Creed to Covenant\*

Delivered at the [Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Harford County](#)

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October 11, 2015

## Abstract

Unitarian Universalism is not based upon a creed, locked in by dogma, but rather by a covenant of shared principles. Today we explore how this fundamental change came about.

Picture this: you are in Bithynia of Nicea. It's the year 325 of the Common Era. (Nowadays this place is Isuk of Turkey). You have gathered here because you were called by order of the Roman Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine to define the nature of Jesus Christ and other matters like an official date for Easter. But the substance of Jesus was the order of the day and the reason that Emperor Constantine felt this meeting was necessary. Over 300 bishops arrived, along with elders, priests, and deacons, to answer Constantine's call to define for him and the Empire what it means to be Christian.

There were two main arguments that divided the Christian communities, with many who were not fond of either extreme. A priest named Arius believed Jesus was not an eternal being, but that he was a creature like the rest of us, created at a certain time by God. Deacon Athanasius argued that Jesus was eternal, of the same substance as God and so part of a trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Bishops covering the middle ground held views that parceled out the degrees of Jesus' divinity and whether his life began when he was born or was begotten (which means having no beginning nor end), or perhaps he had a beginning when he was born but now not an end, or he is a companion of God but not God... you

see what I mean.

Constantine, a smart politician, could see that these divisions were not only tearing the church apart, but were weakening the stability of the Empire. The conference calling for all the bishops of the church was the first ecumenical council, though few representatives from the West could make it to the meeting.

Eusebius of Caesarea, was there, a historian who wrote of the life of Constantine:

The most distinguished of God's ministers from all the churches which abounded in Europe, Africa, and Asia assembled here... There were more than 300 bishops, while the number of elders, deacons and the like was almost incalculable. Some of these ministers of God were eminent for their wisdom, some for the strict living, and patient endurance of persecution, and others for all three. Some were venerable because of their age, others were conspicuous for their youth and mental vigor, and others were only just appointed. The Emperor provided them all with plenty of food... The various sides

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\*Some of the ideas in this sermon are reworked from an earlier sermon: "[From Creed to Covenant: Roots of Unitarian Universalism](#)," Nov. 17, 2002, Rev. Lisa Ward.

in the conflict each raised their own points, and from the start there was a tremendous argument. The Emperor listened to them all patiently, impartially and attentively considering everything that was said... Urging them to be of one mind, he eventually succeeded in bringing them to agreement on all the issues before them. They were united in the confession of faith, and also about the date of Easter.<sup>1</sup>

This is where the Nicene Creed was drafted, the first dogmatic statement of the politically sanctioned, unified Christian church. Over 300 bishops signed the creed with reports of two—five who refused. Arius was one who refused and quickly became labelled as a heretic.

You see the minute an orthodoxy is created, and a profession of faith required, then all who do not profess this creed are deemed heretics. “Heresy” comes from the root word for “choice.” Heretics choose to believe something other than the orthodoxy. Heresy at this time was a dangerous endeavor. It could lead and did lead for centuries, to death, exile, imprisonment or shunning.

There is an immediate danger in requiring a profession of faith to be included in circles of power. People may not follow through on what they are forced to believe. “The victory at Nicea was hollow,” wrote William P. Farley, “All but two bishops had signed the Nicene Creed, but many, it turned out, signed dishonestly. They signed because they feared the emperor. They had little conviction about the importance of the doctrine.”<sup>2</sup>

The orthodoxy had a ways to go. Church leaders followed through on several more councils to solidify Catholicism, its established Bible and hierarchy of authority.

It is here that the approach to religious community and spiritual deepening changed for Chris-

tians. Before the Nicene creed, it was how you lived your life that identified you as a Christian. After the creed it was what you professed to believe. Before the creed, Christianity was a religion of Jesus’s ministry. After the creed, Christianity became a religion about Jesus.

What became ritually important, as dogma took hold, was to worship Jesus rather than live his ministry and relinquish authority of one’s own understanding and connection to life to the ways of the church. Followers were urged away from one’s own intuition and experience of Jesus’ wisdom to the rules and dogma handed down by church authorities.

So the council of Nicea is a seminal moment in our history. Unitarians and Universalists were not yet established, but our brave forebears were carving out space in Christianity’s collective consciousness for a religion based on freedom of belief, dignity of being, love of Creation and trust in one’s soul’s wisdom. Our forebears, who risked bodily and societal harm, found entirely different messages of worth and belief in the teachings of Jesus and the epiphanies experienced in prayer and the faithful living of their lives.

The most common question asked of any Western faith community is “What do you believe?” Most expect a creedal answer, one that is easily recognizable and repeatable, one that would be the answer if you asked anyone of that faith anywhere. That is not, however, the kind of answer a Unitarian Universalist can give, nor one, I might add, that a Buddhist or Hindu or Taoist can give, so we’re not alone, really, in this communication gap.

It became clear to our forebears that ascribing to a creed can lead to a kind of dogmatism that stops one’s religious growth and journey toward understanding. They realized that giving authority to a proscribed way of claiming belief took the authority, and often responsibility, away from the individual. A religion is to be lived not merely believed and must be present to the ways

<sup>1</sup>[www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/nicea/](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/nicea/). Nicea from The History of the Church; Book 1, chapter 8.

<sup>2</sup>William P. Farley, *Enrichment Journal*, Summer 2007, p. 138, “Athanasius and Nicea”.

and wisdom of the experiences and teachings of our lives.

Eventually, throughout the centuries, affirmations of faith came into being to help the seeker identify and find language for the deepening of this liberal religious faith. These affirmations changed form throughout the years, sometimes locally organized in a church community, and sometimes in larger, denominational contexts.

Unitarianism and Universalism, two distinct denominations, merged in 1961. Soon, through a democratic process that took several years, a covenant, an agreement to abide by a list of principles, came into being. This covenant is an agreement that creates the ground from which our truth can flourish. It is an affirmation of ways of relating that fosters health and equanimity in religious community. It is based more on trust than control, inspired by the authority of respect and honor rather than rules and punishment.

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: “I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming.” This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.

A creed creates a static truth, something that does not incorporate new insights and realities. A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives. A creed seeks uniformity and a unison voice. A covenant seeks harmony and a shared voice. Sometimes we may arrive at a unison, but it is not required. A creed gives authority to the statement. A covenant gives authority to shared intention. A creed creates an “us” and “them.” A covenant invites relationship. A creed is a prescription that must be relied on. A covenant relies on the treasures of shared truth.

The overall trust within this covenant is in

the Truth (Capital “T”): something which no one person can fully see and something which each and every person can come to know—in glimpses, in another’s story, in epiphanies. Truth is ever changing in our seeking to understand because of our limited perspectives—we grow into a deeper sense of the meaning of all things when we take our journeys seriously, with full heart and mind. The courage within this covenant is in the acceptance and celebration of life, with all of its challenges, pain, ironies and joys. And the sacrifice within this covenant is in the letting go of dogma, of assumptions, of control—and giving over to a greater wisdom which comes to us in bits and pieces. The task of this covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripples of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

We believe that a sacred knowing within or an arriving by inspiration can inform the ways of humankind. There have been extraordinary spiritual teachers throughout the ages and in many lands who can help us find our way if we but welcome their wisdom into our lives. We honor the religious questions people have struggled with in all times and places. We trust in the Source of All Life, known in many ways and given many names, existing even beyond our naming. As is said in an affirmation posted at this church: “We maintain that there is mutual strength in willing cooperation and that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> “Dare to love God without mediator or veil,” Unitarian preacher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his famous Divinity Address, “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost—cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with deity. . . live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.”

Abiding in covenant is an art form. A mutual creation. It must be given and received. Offered, noticed and responded to. It is a leap of faith into the unknown, welcoming what may become

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<sup>3</sup>UU Fellowship of Harford County, circa 1995. Posted affirmation upon the building of a new sanctuary.

of the encounter. It means moving beyond securing our own space into securing space enough for others. It means entering the relationship with the understanding of a mutual capacity to learn and to teach. It means an openness to what we do not know. To practice listening and teaching. To allow for awkward, even contentious moments of exploration and experimentation. It means regarding your neighbor as a gift and a challenge to your world, but knowing he or she is equally a part of it. It means, as well, protecting the shared vision by defying inappropriate behavior, taking action when violation has occurred and protecting the vulnerability of those striving to reach the common endeavor. Being open and trusting is rarely easy—it is impossible if there

are no boundaries. We honor each other by reminding ourselves of our best potential in this brave and fragile work of building and deepening covenant.

Do bring yourselves into this community. Believe in the wisdom you carry. Only you can silence your truth—you have it in you to bring it to its fullest life. And the inspiration that will occur when you do will encourage others to find theirs. Give yourself voice; you may be surprised by its wisdom. Hear another into speech; you may be moved to new understandings. Enter the dance of covenant, grounded in the trust for wisdom and love to guide our way. So may it be. Amen. ■

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