



The Reverend Charles Henry Brigham

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I. The Man

Early in 1865, The American Unitarian Association selected the Reverend Charles Henry Brigham to undertake a mission to reach students at the 28 – year old University of Michigan. He was also appointed by the AUA to serve as minister to the newly established First Congregational Unitarian Society of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Brigham was highly regarded: before coming to Ann Arbor, he had had a long and successful ministry in Taunton MA. He was a respected biblical scholar who was conversant with many languages, he was a legendarily hard worker and he was an excellent preacher and orator.

Soon after his arrival here, Brigham was appointed non-resident Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Biblical Archaeology at the Meadville Theological School, then in Pennsylvania, where he lectured annually. He was also a prolific contributor to Unitarian publications and he wrote for the *New American Review* and other secular publications. After Brigham's death, a UM professor wrote to the editor of the Unitarian Review that:

“He was, in many respects, the most remarkable man I ever knew....In addition to his intellectual vigor, there was something grand in the robust moral character of the man.”

II. The Context

There was a lot going on when Charles Brigham preached his first sermon here on the first Sunday of September in 1865: Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, had been published six years earlier. By offering a way of understanding life on earth without supernatural explanations, Darwin's work stimulated lots of religious controversy. Even so, the Bible remained the final authority for most people, and even in our liberal religion, the foremost quality in a minister was a full and comprehensive knowledge of the Bible.

Meanwhile, out here in what was considered "the West" a small group of radical Unitarian ministers was causing headaches for the American Unitarian Association back in Boston by trying to push Unitarianism away from emphasizing theism, supernaturalism and ecclesiasticism and toward a focus on Humanism, science and social reform.

This tension within Unitarianism would grow. During the 1880's Brigham's successor in the Ann Arbor pulpit, Jabez Sunderland, would play an important role in what would become known as the Western Controversy.

III. Theology

It is in this context: religious controversy stimulated by Darwin's work, tension within Unitarianism, and the strength of traditional, mainstream Christianity, that I want to highlight some key elements of Charles Brigham's theology. In 1871, he was invited to present an essay to his colleagues at a Conference of Unitarian ministers in Boston.

Here are some of the key ideas that he presented in his essay, entitled "Unitarian Principles and Doctrines:"

1. That every man has a right to form his creed for himself, from his own investigation, thought, and conviction"
2. That no one can be required or expected to believe what is contrary to reason...; that reason is the arbiter of truth, and all truth is to be tested by reason."
3. That no creed can contain the whole of religion; that religious faith cannot possibly be summed up in the words of a creed.

4. “that there can be , and that there ought to be, no uniformity of religious faith. Differences in faith are inevitable.

Brigham continues, that: Unitarians, in their average faith, believe:

1. in the existence of God and that God is one, not divided in his Deity, not dual, or triple, or quadruple, or centuple but strictly one.
2. That all men are sinners because they transgress laws which are appointed for their physical and spiritual welfare. This transgression is sometimes voluntary and deliberate....Oftener it is involuntary...
3. That salvation is the reconciliation of life to the laws of God
4. That Christ saves man by his teaching, by giving them good instruction, by giving them right moral and religious ideas.
5. That the books of the Bible are the record of the teaching of God through Jewish and early Christian wise men written in the words of men .

Charles Brigham was a mainstream Unitarian. To the radical Unitarian Westerners, who sought to adapt religious ideas to modern culture, this mainstream theology represented an out-dated, theistic, ecclesiastical, conservative world view.

But, to most mid-nineteenth century American Christians, Brigham’s theology was radical, if not dangerous. You can get a sense of how powerful that feeling was from an 1869 letter signed by several UM professors and local clergymen who believed that it was essential that the University be led by “a man of sound Evangelical views and active Christian influence” to counter the impact that Brigham was having on UM students. The letter describes Brigham’s ministry this way:

“The Unitarians of New England ... have sustained Brigham as a missionary here, for the avowed purpose of inculcating their peculiar notions among the students.”

Charles Brigham succeeded in this avowed purpose. James Gott, one of our founding members, observed after Brigham’s death in 1879 that:

" Mr. Brigham's influence with the students in disseminating liberal views cannot be estimated. He was the teacher of a large Bible class . . . all over the land are scattered the members of Mr. Brigham's Bible class; many of them editors of secular journals; and I have no doubt that the liberality of many such journals in the West is the natural outgrowth of this Bible class."

Clearly, Charles Brigham was successful in inculcating our Unitarian forbears' "peculiar notions" in the minds of many students during his twelve-year tenure as Minister of First Congregational Unitarian Society of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Presented by Tim Richards
October 19, 2014