

Growing Beyond our Protestant Roots: What Are We & How Did We Get Here?

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Sunday, October 11, 2026
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reading

from *Principles for a Free Faith* by James Luther Adams (1901-1994) printed after sermon

Music from Protestant Sources

Hymns: This Boat (Laura Zucker, Mount Diablo UU Church), #15 The Lone Wild Bird, #298 Wake Now, My Senses.

Instrumentals: Peace in the Valley (Thomas A. Dorsey), Hymn-tune Prelude on Orlando Gibbons's Song 13 (Ralph Vaughan Williams), Bist du bei mir [Be Thou with Me], (Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 508).

Sermon

[After Bach's music.] Thank you for the music, Tom and Irina. The depth and beauty of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach may not be proof that God exists. But if that is true, then Bach's music is also evidence that God is a Protestant. And Lutheran in particular. In the early decades of the Protestant Reformation Bach was the music director in the German city of Leipzig for four Lutheran churches at the same time.

This year in both Religious Education and Sunday services, we are looking at some of the various faiths among our neighbors in Sacramento. This month we are looking at Protestant Christianity, a 500-year-old tradition. Protestants are not only our neighbors, but we also occupy the same family tree. To be sure, it's a very big, diverse family. In the United States alone, there are 200 Protestant denominations, give or take, depending on whether a congregation considers itself part of a denomination.ⁱ Moreover, many of the members of this big don't talk to each other or even acknowledge each other.

The Protestant Reformation began in Europe in 1517. A Catholic monk had become disgusted by the corruption in the Roman Catholic priesthood, especially the hierarchy. This was Martin Luther. He wasn't the only angry Catholic, but he was the one who wrote his accusations on paper—95 of them—and he nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenburg. Luther didn't intend to start a new religious movement, but that's what happened. And it even got named after him! Today there are 78 million Lutherans all around the world; in America, fewer than 7 million.

Not long after Luther got it all started, a Swiss man and a French man began protesting against the top-down authority structure in the Catholic church, starting with the Pope. This led them to found what is called the Reformed tradition, also known as Calvinism. It was named after that Frenchman, John Calvin. In addition to their condemnation of the priesthood, these reformers also hated the ornamentation of Catholic churches: candles, icons, statues of the saints, and crucifixes bearing the Body of Christ. The Reformers called this idolatry. For centuries their own churches had bare walls and used no candles.

Protestant ideas rapidly in Europe among whole populations—villages, cities and the territories of noble families. Much of the energy behind this movement came from a new technology known as the printing press. Up till then, the Holy Bible had been copied by hand and held closely by the priests of the church. Now it could be printed in quantity, first in Latin and then in local languages, like German and French and later in English. The Bible became a tool for literacy. Ordinary people learned to read it for themselves and think about it for themselves. They conversed with one another about what it meant. They argued about how to live according to the Bible. Protestantism spread as many people decided they no longer had a need for popes, priests or other human intermediaries to the divine. All believing Christians had equal access to God.

In central Europe, our Unitarian ancestors entered the story about 50 years after Luther and Calvin had started the Reformation. In the Hungarian-speaking principality of Transylvania, the king and parliament issued a law mandating tolerance among the competing religions. That was in 1568. Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic preachers made their cases in public debates--heated perhaps, but peaceful. One of those debating preachers decided he had been wrong to believe the doctrine of the Trinity. His name was Francis David. He started a movement which became Unitarian. In Hungarian their slogan says *Egy az Isten* [pronounced *edge ahz Ishten*]: God Is One.

Even now, 450 years later, you can meet Hungarian-speaking Unitarians and visit their churches in many villages and cities of Transylvania and in a couple of cities in Hungary.

If you visit Poland however, you will see only the ruins of Unitarian chapels. These were built by members of a Unitarian sect known as the Polish Brethren. That movement lasted for a century, until the mid-1600s. If you do visit, there are a few modern Polish UUs who will show you around, because they want to share the history with UUs from other countries. Three of our members here at UUSS have joined me on tours to see the sights in person. We don't call it a tour; for us it is a pilgrimage.

The Polish Brethren split away from Reformed congregations. Not only did they hold anti-trinitarian views about Jesus of Nazareth. They also had their own ideas about the proper ethical conduct and the social responsibility for followers of Jesus. On the lands of tolerant wealthy landowners (members of the nobility), the Brethren built homes and chapels. They gathered for prayer, worship, and theological discussion. They wanted to follow the values taught and modeled by Jesus. For example, the Brethren were pacifists, refusing military service and opposing the death penalty. They wanted to live by the Bible's accounts of the early church leaders. For example, they tried to share possessions in common, as the disciples had. That didn't last very long.

The Polish Brethren founded their own city, established educational academies, and operated a printing press to distribute theological books. In mid-1600s, unfortunately, Poland's royal politics shifted, and the Catholic Church's Counter-Revolution came after them, as well as other Protestant heretics. The [Polish-Lithuanian] parliament banished the Polish Brethren from their own country. They were physically assaulted by mobs, and their property destroyed. Fortunately, thanks to their printing press, their ideas outlived them. Many of their books found their way to other parts of Europe and even to England.

Around the same time, up in Holland, John Robinson, a Reformed leader from England, was giving a farewell address to a group of separatists preparing to set sail to America. On

Thanksgiving in America, we remember them as the Pilgrims. They had separated from the Church of England, which a few decades earlier had broken away from the Roman Catholic Church. In 1620, as they prepared to sail here, John Robinson blessed them on their journey. And he said: “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word.”

These words continue to inspire many descendants of the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. There is “yet more light and truth to break forth.” And this principle continues to link our UU movement to that Reformed heritage.

As our UU theologian James Luther Adams put it, the first principle of religious liberalism says that the revelation of religious truth is continuous. It is ongoing. Truth is not static in any book of scripture, not sealed in any creed or doctrine, not handed down by a church authority. As Adams taught, liberal religion means that we encourage spiritual exploration. We trust intellectual curiosity. Questions are good. People of goodwill can disagree, sometimes deeply, but the way to change another’s mind is never by force, only by persuasion and by example. More light and truth can always break forth.

In America, the Pilgrims founded Plymouth Colony, but the Puritans established and ran the much larger and wealthier colony, the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They didn’t agree with the Pilgrims about “more light” breaking through. The Puritans made Calvinism the only allowable kind of Christianity in the colony. Hence, they persecuted Quakers and other dissenters, maiming their faces as punishment, even hanging some of them on Boston Common.ⁱⁱ They banished the Baptists. In response, Roger Williams, the leader of the exiled Baptists, founded the colony of Rhode Island. It was one of the first colonies to guarantee a total separation of church and state.

Over their first two centuries in Massachusetts, the Puritans had a mixed record, morally speaking. Not only did they conduct witch trials and persecute heretics, but they also stole indigenous lands. Some were slaveholders. On the other hand, they were devoted to education, establishing academies for young men and founding Harvard College, also for young men. Thanks to the deep culture of study and learning among the ministers of the Puritan congregations, by the late 1700s many of their ministers came up with new ideas. They began to preach radical ideas about the life and ministry Jesus. They said that he was a prophet sent by God, but not the same as God. And his life and ministry showed a rejection of the Calvinist view that human beings are inherently evil or totally depraved. Jesus demonstrated our human ability to grow in goodness. He demonstrated the inherent worth of every person.

In 1819, the leader of these liberals, Boston minister William Ellery Channing, preached a sermon at a church in Baltimore on the subject of Unitarian Christianity.ⁱⁱⁱ For the liberal ministers, this was their coming-out statement. It was the manifesto of the Unitarian movement. The reaction to it caused congregations to break apart and new ones to start, first in Massachusetts, then in other parts of New England. By the middle of the 1800s Unitarian churches appeared in the Midwest and Great Plains, and many of them were non-Christian, even non-theistic. Many of these new churches were led by new ministers who were women. These ministers built their communities by preaching a religion of ethics: generosity, hospitality, shared sacrifice. To be fair, eventually the congregational churches of those Puritans grew more liberal too. Many of them ended up establishing the most liberal Christian denomination of the country, the United Church of Christ. On the values of human dignity and human freedom, we remain very close to these cousins.

As you can see on the sign outside our church, we have two names that start with a *U*. Universalism is another branch of our Protestant family tree. In America, it began in the late 1700s when self-taught ministers in and around Massachusetts applied their common sense to reading the Bible. They studied it with care and with an open heart.

Doing so led them to proclaim their good news that God is a loving parent to every member of the human family. Against Calvinist ideas, the Universalists argued that God is not a tyrant. That's because only a tyrant would create all of humanity only to throw most of us into eternal torment. On the contrary, the Creator's love is universal, they said. Thus, there is no hell. As you might expect, many orthodox Christians condemned the Universalists. But a lot of people joined them, and the movement spread across America. They built churches. Inspired by the love of the human family, Universalists worked for social reform including improving prison conditions and mental health care. Universalists founded schools and colleges, including Tufts University and the California Institute of Technology. But perhaps their greatest contribution is the message that a God of love will not send any people to hell.^{iv} It's worth noting that by now, many mainstream denominations have come around to this view. There is "yet more light and truth to break forth."

Over the past couple of centuries our UU heritage has gone through numerous transformations. It would take a year of sermons to explain it all. For example, there's New England's Transcendentalist movement, which began in the 1830s. It was like a reformation of its own which started inside the Unitarian denomination. Among other things, Transcendentalist proclaimed that you don't need to go to church to be spiritual. You can instead look to nature for spiritual truth and inspiration. You don't need to rely on ancient scriptures or on the ancient words of any men who lived long ago. To find your truth, you can look to the stirrings of your own heart and your own mind.^v

Here's another kind of reformation in our heritage. The movement of Religious Humanism began in the 1920s in many Unitarian churches. Its ministers argued that you didn't need to believe in God to be ethical or spiritual. You didn't need to have a God to build a religious community or hold one together. Humanists promoted the use of reason and science, the cause of human freedom, and the celebration of life.^{vi}

Way back in 1674, a Dutch Protestant minister wrote: "The church is reformed, and always being reformed, according to the word of God. Of course, he couldn't have imagined there'd be anything like Unitarianism or Universalism, Humanism or Transcendentalism. But his words apply to our heritage as much as any to any other movement. "Reformed, and always being reformed."

Unitarian Universalism looks a lot different today than it did in our founding years. After all, we have theists, agnostics, and atheists among us. We include among us Jewish UUs, neo-pagans and Buddhists. Some celebrate the turning of the seasons but are not pagans. Some of us practice meditation but are not Buddhists. There are UU Hindus, UU Muslims, and UU Christians. We don't have a creed or an affirmation of belief which we expect individuals to affirm in order to attend or join a UU congregation.

When I describe this diversity to people who are unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism, some ask: *How does that work? What holds you together?* The answer to that is in our deeply-rooted Protestant family tree. What holds us together is the practice of covenant. This is an

enduring legacy of those Calvinist ancestors, those stern but smart Puritans from which the Unitarians broke away.

In 1648, delegates from 25 Puritan congregations in Massachusetts and 24 in other colonies gathered in Cambridge to make a covenant with one another^{vii}. [It's known as the Cambridge Platform.] They didn't vote on a creed that they all had to agree to. They made promises to support one another. By discussion, prayer, and then by vote, the leaders of those congregational churches agreed on the values by which their churches would treat each other. They would offer prayer and fellowship. They would provide help when it was needed, and would even speak words of correction if it seemed that a church was wayward.

This is the background of our own practice of covenant. We don't have a creed or statement of belief that unites us as a congregation. Instead we make promises about how we will support one another and support the church. We make agreements about how we will conduct business and make decisions as a congregation. For those who don't like business meetings (and may want to ignore the reminder to come to our fall meeting next Sunday), this may seem unimportant. But it is at the heart of who we are. Deeds instead of creeds.

As one of the 1,000 congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association we have a set of principles and values. We don't require a statement of belief in these principles and values by our individual members. However, as a congregation we promise to affirm and promote them. Some of these values are transformation, compassion, and generosity. Promoting these values, for us, means that we strive to learn together, speak from the heart, listen with care, and keep an open heart.

I wonder what more truth and light has yet to break forth out of our encounters with sacred scriptures? What truths will emerge from science, dialogue and reason, from literature and the other arts? What light will break forth from our own sacred longings?

Because of our Protestant roots, this movement of ours is reformed and always reforming. I wonder what opinions that we now hold widely in our congregations might, in some future time, face challenges from others who insist that we hear their perspectives and examine our hearts? What light will break forth when we keep our hearts open to other people's experience? I am excited and curious to find out. There is "yet more light and truth to break forth." Let us keep our hearts open to it. Amen.

Reading

This reading is adapted from an essay about religious liberalism. It was written after the Second World War by the late James Luther Adams, a UU minister and important theological school professor. It's entitled *Principles for a Free Faith*. Adams writes this:

Religious liberalism depends first/ on the principle that [the revelation of truth] is continuous. *Meaning* has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents and do not capsule reality. Events of word, deed, and nature are not sealed. They point always beyond themselves.

The second major principle of religious liberalism is that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion, [especially in matters of religious belief].

Some time ago there was a good bit of excitement about the study of social organizations among birds. Scientists studying how long it takes a group of fowl to form a social organization reported that within 18 to 24 hours, a group of chickens hitherto unacquainted with each other formed a tightly structured social organization—a rigid hierarchy of *pecking rights*. Liberalism, in its social articulation, might be defined as a protest against “pecking orders.” This second principle, ... can be stated in religious terms in various ways. Historically, the more profound forms of liberalism began in the [early modern] world as a protest against ecclesiastical pecking orders.

Protests against political and economic pecking orders soon followed. This protest [came from the] basic theological assertion that all [people] are children of God... All persons [can] share in the deepest meanings of existence, all have the capacity for discovering ... truth, and all are responsible for selecting ... the right means of cooperation for the fulfillment of human destiny.

These religious affirmations are the basis of the belief that the method of free inquiry and persuasion [instead of coercion] is the only one consistent with both the dignity and the limitations of human nature....

ⁱ Stephen Beale, “Just How Many Protestant Denominations Are There?” *National Catholic Register*, Oct. 31, 2017. Accessed October 9, 2026. <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/just-how-many-protestant-denominations-are-there>

ⁱⁱ “Mary Dyer, Quaker,” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Dyer

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank Carpenter, “William Ellery Channing,” *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*. <https://www.uudb.org/channing-william-ellery/>

^{iv} “Universalism,” Britannica.com. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Universalism>

^v “Transcendentalism and Ralph Waldo Emerson,” Harvard Square Library. <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/transcendentalism-ralph-waldo-emerson/>

^{vi} For more about Humanism, read William R. Murry, “Reason and Reverence,” *UU World*, Winter 2006, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/emerging-religious-humanism>

^{vii} “Cambridge Platform,” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Platform I could give you lots of detailed and scholarly citations, but this article covers it fine.