

## A Review

*Letters Addressed to Relatives and Friends,  
Chiefly in Reply to Arguments in Support of the Doctrine of the Trinity*  
by Mary Dana, Boston, 1845

I find it significant that the first copy of this book we came upon had the word “Discarded” stamped inside its front cover. Ironically, I find it a pearl of great price. I am made to remember that “that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Clearly, that which is detested by men is often beautiful in God's sight.

This is an unforgettable book — at least I have found it so — due I think to the combination of the writer’s evident hunger for truth and her very great esteem and regard for her father who was of the opposite viewpoint. The letters describe Mary’s journey from a loyal and devout clergyman’s daughter to an astute apologist for the unitarian faith and one who, after a most fervent inquiry after truth, courageously embraced it. Please bear in mind that Mary’s use of “Unitarian” connoted a biblical unitarian stance and not the Unitarian Universalist position that we find today.

Allow yourself to be moved by the words of Mary Dana some 160 years later:

“The days of torture, fire and the sword, have, happily, almost entirely passed away. He who changes his religious opinions has not now, in Protestant countries at least, to fear the strong arm of ecclesiastical power, nor the civil law; no Inquisition holds over our heads its rod of terror; no dungeons open to receive us...But is there not a kind of persecution still enacted, which, though less extreme and violent, is quite as onerous, and no less difficult to bear?



“The days of proscription, slander, insult, and neglect have by no means passed away. Cold greetings, averted looks, long and intimate friendships sundered in a moment, tell a mournful tale in respect to the toleration *really* exercised in this country, so proud of its civil and religious liberty, towards those who have conscientiously changed their opinions. Nor are these the only methods by which the spirit of unyielding intolerance is developed. Injurious suspicions; direct charges which would almost break the heart of the sufferer, did he not feel himself above their reach; the imputation of any and every motive but the real one; all these must be experienced and endured by the one who feels it his duty to leave the ranks of the popular or orthodox theology...and candidly avow his honest opinions...And when I look around me and observe how the great majority of mankind are blindly following the lead of others, how few there are who think for themselves, how few are willing to test their religious opinions by comparing them with other systems of faith, by bringing them all to ‘the law and the testimony’ of God’s inspired word, clinging firmly to truth, following it wherever it might lead, and boldly rejecting error...I ought not, perhaps, to be surprised at the *spirit* which is manifested.”

She then writes these words to her “kind and venerated parents”:

“It has become my solemn duty to make you an announcement, which, I fear, will fill your hearts with sorrow. Would to God that I could save you from the pain, which, from my knowledge of your views and feelings, I am sure awaits you; but I believe, as God is my judge, that *truth* is dearer to me than life itself, and I dare no longer disavow the sentiments, which, after thorough, and *honest*, and prayerful deliberation, I have at length adopted.

“I will keep you no longer in suspense, but will proceed to declare that I do not now believe that my blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the Supreme God. I believe that there is but *one* God, the Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things. I believe that ‘all power’ was given unto him in Heaven and on earth; that he was the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament writers, who, in the fullness of time, came into the world with a commission from God, and full power and authority to do the work which God gave him to do. In other words, after long and earnest deliberation, much diligent study of the Holy Scriptures, and fervent prayer to God for the assistance of his spirit, I conscientiously and firmly reject the doctrine of the Trinity.”

You will see why I found it necessary to quote extensively from her work — the beauty of the writing is not to be missed. Mary Dana wishes to show her reasons, her evidence, her rationale and her agonizing due to the sure hurt brought to her parents. We all need heroes and heroines. She is surely one of mine. She tells us that she had always found the doctrine of the Trinity so perplexing that she read over and over again all the arguments in its favor, and she candidly says that no one can ever know how she struggled to continue as a Trinitarian, seeing the Trinity as a contradiction in itself.

Her journey is intense and trying. She reveals that before she left her previous church it was noticed that as a prominent member of the choir she did not sing the doxology. A storm arose and “burst upon my head” such as she had never experienced. She was then subject to rejection, criticisms of all sorts, and those blind and hurtful sentiments stemming from ignorance and prejudice.

Surprisingly, Mary Dana says that her chief source of information for her new views was the gospel of John. She says:

“I endeavored to read with an unprejudiced mind, and a teachable spirit, and to explain passages of *doubtful import* by those which could admit of *no possible mistake*. While thus reading, the doctrines of the absolute unity of God, and of the *derived* power and authority of his Son, shone forth from every page of the blessed volume with a brightness and a clearness perfectly convincing to my wondering mind. I could no longer resist the mass of evidence which seemed fully to establish the superiority of the Father to the Son. I found that Christ always spoke of himself as inferior to his Father, of his power and authority as derived from his Father — and it seemed to me that, if the case were otherwise (with humility let me say it), our blessed Lord had studiously endeavored to mislead us.”

I applaud Dana when she says “It seemed strange to me that our compassionate Heavenly Father, who so well knew the weakness of human nature, should require us to receive a doctrine, *violating the common laws of that very reason which he has given us*, without such an explicit statement of it...but I could find no such statement, and no such command in the Bible.” She found that the fact that all power was *given* to Jesus (his own declaration) was a powerful key to understanding things that were previously very hazy and that with this understanding the Bible becomes plain. How simple and how important it is to see that there are two characters in this drama. One gives and one is given to; one is crowned by another; one is made Lord and Christ by the Other. “Our Heavenly Father made his well beloved Son a God over us, and over all the works of his hands; as he made Moses a God to Pharaoh — and as he called them Gods *to whom the word of God came*” (see Exod. 4:16; 7:1; Ps. 82:6; John 10:35-36).

Mary Dana shows herself to be an excellent student of scripture. In fact, in one letter she refers to the fact that she arose at 4 a.m. in order to write to her father, and at one point she became quite exhausted

with all of the reading and writing necessary to her pursuit of truth. She takes what sounds like a hard line today (but perhaps is the narrow way) when she says, “Those cannot be Christians who deny what Christ came to teach.” She finds that the early fathers did not believe that the Trinity was taught in the scriptures and that any proposition of human origin not explicitly stated in the scriptures cannot be considered authoritative. She sees as “perplexing and impossible ideas of three perfect beings equal to one perfect being; or of two incompatible natures.” She candidly points out that those who assert that the will of the three in the supposed Trinity is the same are virtually making Jesus say, “I seek not my own will, but the will of myself.” Upon being urged to accept the Trinity, Dana replies, “I have rejected it because I cannot find it in the Bible. If I could satisfy myself that it was there, I would instantly receive it, however incomprehensible.”

When charged with not giving enough honor to Jesus, she responds:

“When Christ declares, without qualification, that there was a certain day and hour of which he knew nothing, we, who are Unitarians, *believe* him. You, on the contrary, make him prevaricate, and in one nature, deny what he certainly must have known in the other; and yet these two natures you declare to have been in constant and intimate union. You continually make him contradict himself. This is, in my view, sadly to *dishonor* him.”

There are 30 letters. I have only scratched the surface of the topics she covers: mental clarity, mental freedom, mental suffering, use of reason, methods of investigation, consequences of truth. You will find gems like this: the great hymn writer Dr. Watts’ last thoughts were completely unitarian and he wished to be able to alter his hymns but it was out of his power to do so.

We who are biblical unitarians are so often maligned and accused of demoting Christ. Mary Dana’s beautiful defense is this:

“I speak the truth, and I weep while I write it, when I declare that I would sooner die than rob the blessed Saviour — my once crucified, but now risen and glorified Lord, my Advocate, my Intercessor with the Father — of one particle of the honor and glory which is his due. Every word that the Bible speaks concerning him I believe to be *true*. I believe that ‘God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’...I go to the Father only through him, because I believe He is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and that ‘other foundation can no man lay.’”

My thanks to Christian Educational Services who reprinted this book in 1994.

Respectfully submitted,  
Barbara Buzzard