

The Transylvanian Unitarian gospel of Sigismund. Delivered on Jul 7, 2024 at the First Unitarian Church of St Louis.

After reading today's sermon title some of you may have scratched your head saying: I thought there were only Gospels of Mark, John, Luke, and Matthew in the Bible. The word "gospel" stands for good news, and translated from the Greek original word, evangelion. So, in my title today with the word "gospel" I was referring to the good news, evangelion, that Sigismund, more specifically King John Sigismund, II represented for Transylvanian Unitarians.

Just how good that news had to be to qualify for evangelion? It had to be something special, because, according to Glen David, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship at Stanford University, the word evangelion was used only two dozen times or so throughout hundreds of years of Greek and Roman historical and philosophical writings.

What could be so restrictive in the meaning of that word? Evangelion is a type of good news that is wholly unexpected, almost undeserved, unearned positive development. In the New Testament the unexpected good news was a path to salvation prophesized by prophets of the Old Testament, but became possible only through the birth and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the 21st century we would call evangelion a game-changer type of news that likely comes about with divine intervention.

Could the deeds of John Sigismund, II of Transylvania really be an evangelion, a gospel? The answer is yes if protecting a new religious movement is the deed. Examples of such gospel-like protection by rulers? In the early 1500s a theological criticism of the Catholic Church brought severe persecution on the head of any challenger, typically ending in torture, beheading, or being burned at the stake. After the Catholic Church declared Martin Luther a heretic and forbade anyone to give him

shelter, it was Frederick the Wise who saved Martin Luther from being murdered. It was the Queen Marguerite of Navarre who protected John Calvin from being killed by French Catholics in 1533.

Let us examine the events in Transylvania a little closer. The birth of John Sigismund, II on July 7, 1540 didn't reveal an evangelion promise. Two weeks later his father, John Zapolya, the king of Eastern Hungary dies; his mother, Queen Isabella and her court advisors came under the protection of Turkish Sultan. Between age 11 and 16 Sigismund lived in Poland with Isabella to ride out political uncertainty in Transylvania. It was noted at that time that young Sigismund showed interest in religious debates and discussions among Roman Catholics.

With a renewed support from the Sultan, Isabella and Sigismund moved back to Transylvania. Until her death in 1559, Isabella rules the Transylvania territory. Her acts included signing treaties, and withdrawing from some, spurring marriage proposals, standing up to the rival king of West Hungary. In my eyes she earned the title: "Mother of all Unitarians". But that's a topic for another sermon.

So, at age 19 Sigismund took over, and he was immediately challenged. Transylvanian szekelys revolted, because they felt their ancient rights weren't respected, and that revolt was crushed by Sigismund. The King of West Hungary, Ferdinand attacked, and succeeded in conquering several counties. That action started a long civil war between the two kings.

His curiosity about truth continues even amidst a civil war, and the diplomatic dance with the Turkish Sultan. In 1562 he turns Lutheran, and, as a sign of his drive to explore the truth he writes to Wittenberg to invite Lutheran scholars to Transylvania to clarify religious issues. Unitarians in 2024 would say that he was an early supporter of the 4th principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In terms of Values this is expressed within the value "Pluralism".

His curiosity was no doubt further enhanced once he appointed Giorgio Biandrata as his court physician. Sigismund probably didn't know that Biandrata had in his possession one of the banned and burned books of that age: Michael Servetus' "Christianismi Restitutio", the very book that became a few years later the source of many ideas for antitrinitarians in Transylvania. Our ancestors in faith had some audacity. But that's a topic for another sermon.

If I want to point to one aspect of Sigismund's rule: it was the conviction that rational people on two sides of an issue can peacefully resolve differences, and come to an agreement, stop bickering with each other. From the king's point of view that would be the best outcome for the country.

In order to avoid fighting for territory he sent envoys several times to Ferdinand offering to decline the title of king if he's allowed to retain all Eastern Hungary; offered to marry the Hapsburg ruler's daughter. None of those peace offers were accepted.

Sigismund turned Calvinist in 1564, and when it came to the disagreements between Calvinists and the new antitrinitarian movement of the court preacher David Ferenc, Sigismund yet again allows exploration of biblical truth by organizing religious debates, disputations. That is a gospel type good news, because the king could have decreed to make Transylvania a Calvinist kingdom, but he retained an open mind!!

In 1566, the dream of Sigismund seemed to be at hand: success of bringing the leader of Hungarian Calvinists and the antitrinitarian David Ferenc to agreement, The two sides created a document of understanding titled: "Articles of Christian Unity". The theological debates stopped, but then a series of unexpected events unfolded a thousand miles from Transylvania. In Bern, Switzerland, the openly antitrinitarian Valentino Gentile was arrested by Calvinist leaders Melancton and Beza. After being tortured Gentile refused to recant antitrinitarian theology, and he was beheaded. As it turned out, Gentile's theological views were similar to the ones expressed in Articles of Christian Unity. By February 1567 the Hungarian Calvinist points of view retrenched to

the Swiss Calvinist view, and from then on the religious disputations continued in Transylvania.

In 1567 the cause of Unitarianism had a close call: Sigismund fell ill, was near death during a joined operation with the Turkish Sultan. Sigismund completed a will, including the selection of a successor ruler. He unexpectedly recovered, and everyone forgot about the will. That forgetfulness caused all sorts of complications, including a disastrous civil war, and the death of the majority of Unitarian noblemen, but that's a topic for another sermon.

There were several acts that illustrated that Sigismund was warming to the Unitarian religious point of view. He provided David Ferenc with the use of a printing press, that allowed publications of books written by Biandrata and David. For the next three hundred years those books were the basis for unitarian theology and religious thoughts. That is another gospel type good news, because after the death of Sigismund the printing rights were taken away from Unitarians, so the existence of those early books played a major role in keeping the unitarian religion alive!

1568 was a year of major changes. As a consequence of the success of preaching by David Ferenc, and organized debates between Unitarians and Calvinists, the unitarian theology spreads through Transylvania and even through the Western part of Hungary which was under the rule of the other Hungarian king, Ferdinand. Under the weight of such convincing evidence the National Assembly, the Diet, that gathered in the town of Torda, declared that Unitarian religion is now an officially accepted denomination in Transylvania. In addition, the Diet composed the Edict that expressed ideas of religious freedoms 122 years before the writings you heard from William Penn, and 219 years before the statute you heard from Thomas Jefferson.

Sigismund accepted the Edict, so without a royal challenge the Edict became law. The gospel type good news in that was that the unique legal power of the Edict

saved Unitarians from immediate destruction for three hundred years when the rulers of Transylvania were Catholics.

The last obvious sign that Sigismund turned Unitarian is in his instruction he spoke towards the end of the last debate between Calvinists and Unitarians. The King berated the Calvinist side, and called David Ferenc “our preacher”: “I see that our opponents are uncertain in their opinion, and not steadfast in stating the truth. You tell me you wish our preacher to debate you in a public forum. In our kingdom you may debate any place at any time. We will make our preacher available for it. You can travel without harassment from us, and you have sufficient income, so don’t spare any expenses. We truly wish that scholars would come from foreign countries, so Beza or Simler could state their truth from the word of God. As we see that you do not wish to answer directly some of our questions, we bring this debate to a close.”

So, what does King John Sigismund, II have to do with the denominational name “unitarian” of our church? In truth, the antitrinitarian religion during Sigismund’s reign was called Arian, not unitarian. According to Kovacs Sandor, the historian of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, the first written record of “unitarian religion” is from 1600. The word “unitarian” is carved into a stone tablet from 1613; you can see it for yourself if you visit that wonderful church in Varfalva. By that time “Unitarian” meant a denomination distinguished from other antitrinitarian movements such as the Socinian.

When the word “unitarian” appeared in Western Europe, in England, and in the Americas, it was only meant to say antitrinitarian, and it included groups with diverse views.

In 1815, on the pages of the “Panoplist”, the word “unitarian” was used as a term of accusation of the liberal Christians in New England. William Ellery Channing, who responded that same year to the accusation in a letter to Rev Samuel C. Thatcher, sophisticatedly distinguished the New England movement as “antitrinitarian”, and as

Unitarian with specific characteristics, but not as Socinian (or Mr. Belsham's creed, as Channing stated).

While Channing never explicitly referred to Transylvanian Unitarian writings, we do know that in the liberal Christian circles of Harvard College the writings of Transylvanian Unitarian theologians Enyedi Gyorgy, and Szentabrahami Lombard Mihaly were known, were read, relied upon, and were analyzed for content. My best hypothesis is that Channing's subconscious felt a kinship with some of those Transylvanian Unitarian ideas. Thus, when push came to shove in 1815, he became agreeable to accept the "unitarian" label, because he felt comfortable with that kinship.

The contribution of Sigismund to our denominational name is that he allowed the Transylvanian antitrinitarian fire to burn so intensely that the embers of that fire retained enough warmth to influence Channing to accept the Unitarian name. So, instead of us being called the First Liberal Christian Church, or the First Antitrinitarian Church, or the First Socinian Church, we are the First Unitarian Church of St Louis. And that is also a gospel kind of good news.

Amen.