

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
 A YOUNG MINISTER REFUSES TO PERFORM A
 CRUCIAL DUTY
 (1832)

Of the 164 sermons Emerson composed during his short career as a parish minister (1828–32), this one was the most uniquely argued and deservedly the most famous. In it Emerson explains his refusal to administer any longer the eucharist, or ritual of communion, a decision that split the church and—as he expected and probably also hoped—led immediately to his resignation. For most of the sermon, Emerson presents theological and historical reasons for his stance, with an almost scholastic precision quite atypical of his customary speaking and writing style. But in the section printed here, he abruptly changes tone and becomes much more subjective and fervent. Here for the first time, as it were, Emerson becomes Emerson—the voice that will make him Transcendentalism’s most compelling spokesperson. His conviction that the source of spiritual authority must come from one’s inmost being—later summed up in his Divinity School Address (see Section III) and his essay on Self-Reliance (Section IV-A)—is here expressed in public for the first time. So too is Emerson’s contempt for the worthlessness of mere forms as nothing better than “the dead leaves that are falling around us”—an allusion to the September landscape.

The connection between Emerson’s religious discontent and the declarations of Coleridge and Channing is much more obvious than the link with Carlyle’s disquisition on the age of machinery. But it is no less important in its own way. Why would a “Channing Unitarian” go so far as to renounce his post, as Channing never would? (Indeed,

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"Likeness to God" was a sermon preached on the occasion of a young minister's ordination, his entry into the procession Emerson would soon forsake.) A good part of the answer lies in Emerson's conclusion, recorded in his journal, that the profession itself had become "antiquated." Carlyle's portrait of the present age as one of dizzying change in which the power of individuality was increasingly hemmed in by social institutions was calculated to aggravate any reader's discontent with existing social arrangements, but especially for someone like Emerson, whose feelings about committing himself to the traditional family profession had been profoundly mixed from the start.

SOURCE: *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Wesley T. Mott. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, vol. 4 (1992), Sermon CLXII.

To pass by other objections, I come to this: that the *use of the elements*, however suitable to the people and the modes of thought in the East where it originated, is foreign and unsuited to affect us. Whatever long usage and strong association may have done in some individuals to deaden this repulsion I apprehend that their use is rather tolerated than loved by any of us. We are not accustomed to express our thoughts or emotions by symbolical actions. Most men find the bread and wine no aid to devotion and to some persons it is an impediment. To eat bread is one thing; to love the precepts of Christ and resolve to obey them is quite another. It is of the greatest importance that whatever forms we use should be animated by our feelings; that our religion through all its acts should be living and operative.

The statement of this objection leads me to say that I think this difficulty, wherever it is felt, to be entitled to the greatest weight. It is alone a sufficient objection to the ordinance. It is my own objection. This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. If I believed that it was enjoined by Jesus, on his disciples, and that he even contemplated to make permanent this mode of commemoration every way agreeable to an Eastern mind, and yet on trial it was disagreeable to my own feelings, I should not adopt it. I should choose other ways which he would approve more. For what could he wish to be commemorated for? Only that men might be filled with his spirit. I find that other modes comport with my education and habits of thought. For I chuse that my remembrances of him should be pleasing, affecting, religious. I love him as a glorified friend after the free way of friendship and not pay him a

stiff sign of respect as men do to those whom they fear. A passage read from his discourses, the provoking each other to works like his, any act or meeting which tends to awaken a pure thought, a glow of love, an original design of virtue I call a worthy, a true commemoration.

In the last place the importance ascribed to this particular ordinance is not consistent with the spirit of Christianity. The general object and effect of this ordinance is unexceptionable. It has been and is, I doubt not, the occasion of indefinite good, but an importance is given by the friends of the rite to it which never can belong to any form. My friends, the kingdom of God is not meat and drink. Forms are as essential as bodies. It would be foolish to declaim against them, but to adhere to one form a moment after it is outgrown is foolish. That form only is good and Christian which answers its end. Jesus came to take the load of ceremonies from the shoulders of men and substitute principles. If I understand the distinction of Christianity, the reason why it is to be preferred over all other systems and is divine is this, that it is a moral system; that it presents men with truths which are their own reason, and enjoins practices that are their own justification; that if miracles may be said to have been its evidence to the first Christians they are not its evidence to us, but the doctrines themselves; that every practice is Christian which praises itself and every practice unchristian which condemns itself. I am not engaged to Christianity by decent forms; it is not saving ordinances, it is not usage, it is not what I do not understand that engages me to it—let these be the sandy foundation of falsehoods. What I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to my mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason, the persuasion and courage that come out of it to lead me upward and onward.

Freedom is the essence of Christianity. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us.