

A Self-Understanding of Christian Science

**Shirley Paulson
Head of Ecumenical Affairs
The First Church of Christ, Scientist**

**Boston, MA
2013**

Self-Understanding of Christian Science

Basic History and How the Christian Science Movement has Evolved

All Christian churches have one bond of unity, one nucleus or point of convergence, one prayer, – the Lord’s Prayer. It is matter for rejoicing that we unite in love, and in this sacred petition with every praying assembly on earth, – “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” – Mary Baker Eddy¹

The Church of Christ, Scientist – known commonly as the Christian Science Church – understands itself to be a denomination within Christianity. Its members welcome everyone to its worship and ministry. God is “the Alpha and Omega, the centre and circumference”² in Christian Science theology. Thus God’s loving embrace for the whole creation is all-sufficient and all-pervading. It is epitomized in Christ Jesus, God’s beloved Son, who was sent to announce the good news.

The founder of the Christian Science Church, Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), envisioned a church that would revive the early Christian spirit through a humble and sincere commitment to the reconciling power of Christ. The Bible is the sacred scriptural authority for the Church, and Christian Scientists look to Mary Baker Eddy’s interpretation of it for its spiritual meaning. Other scholars and interpreters are acknowledged insofar as their insights lead to spiritual understanding.

Eddy was raised in and became a member of a Congregational (Trinitarian) Church at age 17, even though she rejected the doctrine of predestination. What she termed her “great discovery” was the spiritual significance of Scriptures, where she understood the practical connection between the Master’s teaching and healing, and his crucifixion and resurrection. Eddy founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, in 1879 and reorganized it in 1892.

As it is evolving in its second century, the Christian Science Church draws on its roots through the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, which include the *Church Manual of The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts*.³ This slim volume contains both the anchor to the Church’s core values and the basic laws for Church governance for the world and for perpetuity. It establishes a self-perpetuating five-member Board of Directors, which holds the authority to speak and make decisions on behalf of the Church. The *Manual* continues to guide the proceedings of both The Mother Church and all the branch churches in their adaptation to the signs of the times; the Board is responsible for interpreting the *Manual* and for transacting the business of The Mother Church. Consistent with the earliest Christian communities, local branch churches are governed essentially democratically, with no church hierarchy.

During the 20th century and on into the 21st, the church has endeavored to keep its activities meaningful and contemporary. It has provided chaplains as support to Christian

Scientists and members of other denominations in the armed services. The magazines and newspaper Eddy founded have undergone changes in format and content in order to keep them fresh and relevant. And although the number of church members and public practitioners of healing peaked in the 1950s, there have been periodic efforts to encourage members to renew their commitment to Christian healing and to keep churches alive with the love of Christ. Particularly noteworthy are activities to support young people. A current example is a well-received program called ‘Radical Acts.’ Its purpose is to encourage young people to commit to striving to live Jesus’ most challenging teachings.

Contemporary writers on Christian Science are known mostly through the weekly, monthly, and quarterly religious magazines. These consist of the *Christian Science Sentinel* that covers contemporary issues with healing messages, *The Christian Science Journal* that reports the mission and inspiration of Church activities, and *The Herald of Christian Science* that provides inspiration in a variety of languages by and for English and non-English-speaking communities.

The Christian Science Monitor is an international news service that delivers thoughtful, global coverage via its website, weekly magazine, and other platforms. Founded by Mary Baker Eddy to “injure no man but to bless all mankind,”⁴ the *Monitor* illustrates the Church’s commitment to justice, peace, and caring for creation. In attracting millions of people per month to its website, CSMonitor.com, the *Monitor*’s high quality journalism is indeed serving a responsive public readership.

Doctrinal Topics

Once more I write, Set your affections on things above; love one another; commune at the table of our Lord in one spirit; worship in spirit and in truth; and if daily adoring, imploring, and living the divine Life, Truth, Love, thou shalt partake of the bread that cometh down from heaven, drink of the cup of salvation, and be baptized in Spirit. – Mary Baker Eddy⁵

There are six tenets of Christian Science, written by Mary Baker Eddy in her textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*.⁶ Christian Science theology resonates with the confession of faith in the Apostolic Creed.⁷

1. As adherents of Truth, we take the inspired Word of the Bible as our sufficient guide to eternal Life.
2. We acknowledge and adore one supreme and infinite God. We acknowledge His Son, one Christ; the Holy Ghost or divine Comforter; and man in God’s image and likeness.
3. We acknowledge God’s forgiveness of sin in the destruction of sin and the spiritual understanding that casts out evil as unreal. But the belief in sin is punished so long as the belief lasts.
4. We acknowledge Jesus’ atonement as the evidence of divine, efficacious Love, unfolding man’s unity with God through Christ Jesus the Way-showers;⁸ and we

- acknowledge that man is saved through Christ, through Truth, Life, and Love as demonstrated by the Galilean Prophet in healing the sick and overcoming sin and death.
5. We acknowledge that the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection served to uplift faith to understand eternal Life, even the allness of Soul, Spirit, and the nothingness of matter.
 6. And we solemnly promise to watch, and pray for that Mind to be in us which was also in Christ Jesus; to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; and to be merciful, just, and pure.

Eddy's Calvinist roots are evident in her Augustinian and Puritan defense of God's absolute goodness and power. Her radical approach to the relationship between matter and Spirit is derived primarily from Paul's writing, especially his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, where he speaks of the flesh (*sarx*) in contrast with Spirit. For example, in Romans, he writes, "... and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ... God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness."⁹

Spirit is understood to be the meaning and reality of being, whereas all the issues that are contrary to the goodness of Spirit (God) originate in the flesh ('matter,' understood as materialism, the material sense of being, or the perspective that humanity and the world are separated from God). Eddy's description in the quote below of "Jesus' advent in the flesh" indicates the importance of his mission to save humanity from suffering in the flesh:

Born of a woman, Jesus' advent in the flesh partook partly of Mary's earthly condition, although he was endowed with the Christ, the divine Spirit, without measure. This accounts for his struggles in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and this enabled him to be the mediator, or *way-shower*, between God and men. Had his origin and birth been wholly apart from mortal usage, Jesus would not have been appreciable to mortal mind as "the way."¹⁰

Spirit declares the presence of the kingdom of God, here and now. Consequently, in the Christian work of atonement and repentance, humans relinquish matter (*sarx*) as useless and impotent.

Incarnation. Christian Science teaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came to the earth in the flesh. Christ is described by Eddy as the "divine manifestation of God, which comes to the flesh to destroy incarnate error,"¹¹ – or error, embodied in the flesh. God's Christ was manifest in the world as Jesus who was divinely appointed by the Father to redeem humanity.

Jesus and Christ. Mary Baker Eddy writes, "The word *Christ* is not properly a synonym for Jesus, though it is commonly so used. ... Christ is not a name so much as the divine

title of Jesus. Christ expresses God's spiritual, eternal nature. The name is synonymous with Messiah, and alludes to the spirituality which is taught, illustrated, and demonstrated in the life of which Christ Jesus was the embodiment."¹² Jesus, therefore, is the beloved Son of God, the product of a virgin birth. He is unique in history as the full expression of Christ, and it is through Jesus that we derive the clearest image of God possible in the human realm.

Trinity. Eddy explains the Trinity this way:

Life, Truth, and Love constitute the triune Person called God, – that is, the triply divine Principle, Love. They represent a trinity in unity, three in one, – the same in essence, though multiform in office: God the Father-Mother; Christ the spiritual idea of sonship; divine Science or the Holy Comforter. These three express in divine Science the threefold, essential nature of the infinite. They also indicate the divine Principle of scientific being, the intelligent relation of God to man and the universe.¹³

Christian Science is not modalism, but biblically based on the allness of God appearing in three offices simultaneously. Mary Baker Eddy rejected Gnosticism and other humanly devised philosophies on the premise that Jesus presented God's order of creation as infinitely greater than the inventions of the human mind.¹⁴ Her Christian model includes God as the Father of the universe. The Son, Christ, is the manifestation of the true nature of God to humanity. Jesus is the incarnate Logos embodying Truth (God). The Holy Spirit expresses the intelligent, animating relationship between God and creation, characterized as ever-present ministering Love.

Atonement. At-one-ment with God¹⁵ was demonstrated through Jesus, who embodied Christ, the saving power of God. Eddy writes of this unity with God: "The divine image, idea, or Christ was, is, and ever will be inseparable from the divine Principle, God. Jesus referred to this unity of his spiritual identity thus: 'Before Abraham was, I am;' 'I and my Father are one;' 'My Father is greater than I.'"¹⁶ As we drink of our Master's cup and are baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire,¹⁷ our sins and suffering in the flesh (*sarx*) are destroyed by Christ. In this way Christ reconciles humanity with God. Through the cup and baptism we are rectified, having knowledge of our sins and repentance so severe that our sins are destroyed. Then, we rest in the unity with our Father. All humanity is invited to this rest, as illustrated by the non-Christian, non-Jewish Chaldean wise men who found their way by the star overlooking the infant born in Bethlehem.

Sacrament. The Scriptural claim that "there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism"¹⁸ is foundational to Christian Science theology. Christian Science is a Christian tradition of applied theology, rather than symbolic ritual; therefore, the sacraments are best understood as acts of faith lived in daily life. Mary Baker Eddy describes baptism and eucharist for Christian Science in these terms:

Our baptism is a purification from all error. Our church is built on the divine Principle, Love. We can unite with this church only as we are new-

born of Spirit, as we reach the Life which is Truth and the Truth which is Life by bringing forth the fruits of Love, – casting out error and healing the sick. Our Eucharist is spiritual communion with the one God. Our bread, “which cometh down from heaven,” is Truth. Our cup is the cross. Our wine the inspiration of Love, the draught our Master drank and commended to his followers.¹⁹

On this basis, baptism is experienced as an overflow of love and tears of repentance so strongly felt that sin is squarely confronted and destroyed. Rather than a one-time ceremony with water, baptism is a conscious submergence in Spirit. Baptism in Christian Science is a frequent, holy, sincere purification alone with Christ. Ritual baptism with water is neither practiced nor required; therefore, Christian Science accepts and respects those who practice baptism in other ways. The eucharist calls us to take up the cross and drink of Jesus’ cup of earthly sorrows so that earthly longings give place to spiritual strength.

Death and resurrection. The death of Jesus was the same kind of death of the flesh experienced by all other humans. But his victory over death serves to lift faith in the same ultimate victory for everyone. As Paul writes, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”²⁰ Christ Jesus overcame the world’s hatred and weight of oppression inflicted on his fleshly body. Christ works in the same way for the rest of us, finally conquering “the last enemy” and revealing the reality of eternal Life.

Healing. The theological premise in Christian Science that God is infinite and omnipotent Love guides the Church’s mission to and blessings for the world. Christ Jesus’ message that the kingdom of God is here is the authority from which his disciples (then and now) heal suffering of all kinds in the world. True healing prayers are “deep and conscientious protests of Truth – of man’s likeness to God and of man’s unity with Truth and Love.”²¹ Prayer, therefore, is considered the greatest blessing to oneself as well as the greatest service to the world. Physical cure through prayer demonstrates God’s unconditional and powerful love for all.

Healing in Christian Science is not willing the sick to recover, but a humble response to God’s loving care for the whole creation. Today, as in Eddy’s time, the Christian Science Church encourages its members and all people to take part in the healing of illness and oppression anywhere in the world. Self-employed practitioners pray with and for others on a fee-for-service basis, serving not just Christian Scientists but anyone who contacts them for help. Another expression of this pastoral care is Christian Science nursing, which provides additional support, such as feeding, cleansing, and bandaging for individuals relying on spiritual care. While these Christian Science practitioners and nurses are recognized by The Mother Church, their healing ministries are not subsidized or controlled by the Church.

Even greater than the healing of bodies is the Christian call to heal sin. Defined in the broad sense as the carnal mind’s antagonism or hostility to God,²² sin is manifested as

aspects of materialism, such as greed, pride, sensuality, envy, gluttony, selfishness, anger, sloth, and so forth. The statement in the third tenet that “sin is punished so long as the belief lasts”²³ emphasizes the nature of sin as a belief in something contrary to God’s goodness rather than an aspect of one’s nature.

Although sin can sometimes produce ill-effects in the body, one cannot deduce that all suffering is a result of sin. Fear and an imperfect understanding of God’s supremacy also result in illness. But when Christ awakens people to their God-given wholeness, the suffering from both sin and sickness gives place to normal well-being. The author of Hebrews distinguishes between human limitations and the power of Christ, as he writes, “for the law made nothing perfect; there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.”²⁴ Healing that results in drawing closer to God usually rouses those who are healed to a desire to pray for the lifting of all forms of oppression everywhere in the world.

Regarding the subject of modern medicine, Christian Science teaching respects the rights of everyone, including Church members, to make their own choices for health care. Evidence of the positive effects of spirituality on health dates back to, and is evident throughout, the earliest days of Christianity, which suggests that one hallmark of Jesus’ ministry – Christian healing – is poised to spark the interest and meet the needs of today’s health seekers. And it is this cornerstone of Jesus’ ministry that is central to the practice of Christian Science. The world of medicine is far more integrative today, looking beyond a merely physical analysis with regard to an individual’s health. In recent years, a number of Christian Scientists have been in dialogue with leading physicians about the impact of thought and prayer on health and disease. On the one hand, dialogue is beneficial for everyone. On the other hand, it should not be regarded as a signal that those who practice Christian Science healing are lessening their conviction in and complete reliance on the healing power of Christ.

The Christian Science Church lovingly encourages, supports, and embraces everyone in their quest for health and well-being. Because of the sincere commitment of Christian Scientists to spiritual healing as an expression of their faith in God, and because of their successful experiences with spiritual healing, they may be reluctant to seek medical treatment for themselves. However, the Christian Science teaching is to love and support others unconditionally, whatever system of health care they may choose.

Christian Science and the Ecumenical Movement

Love all Christian churches for the gospel’s sake; and be exceedingly glad that the churches are united in purpose, if not in method, to close the war between flesh and Spirit, and to fight the good fight till God’s will be witnessed and done on earth as in heaven. – Mary Baker Eddy²⁵

Many Christians, especially those who have been involved in ecumenical work for some time, acknowledge the contemporary evidence of the movement of the Holy Spirit, as it is breaking “down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”²⁶ As more Christians

are becoming increasingly conscious of their role within the context of a global village, they are recognizing the value of magnifying commonalities shared, despite issues that still divide. Additionally, liberation theology has played an important role in awakening a greater awareness of marginalized voices and finding the means to welcome them. These shifting attitudes have encouraged many mainline Christians to listen to and take more seriously the voices of those they have known little about, including Christian Science.

Worldwide, the Faith & Order table is the broadest theological multilateral setting of Christian dialogue. As a movement, Faith and Order is wider than any commission that houses it. The Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA has welcomed the Church of Christ, Scientist, to its table. Further, Christian Science has been invited to send representatives to be members of four commissions of the NCCCUSA – Communications Commission, Interfaith Relations Commission, and Justice and Advocacy Commission, as well as Faith and Order. And the Christian Science Church has not only appreciated this gracious invitation, but has also accepted and sent delegates to attend their sessions.

The Christian Science Church – always having identified itself as Christian – is eager to welcome ecumenical dialogue and is grateful that the opportunity for such exchange has arrived. Mary Baker Eddy, born into a Puritan family in New England, never thought of herself as having left the church in order to form a new denomination, any more than Luther, Calvin, or any other reformer did. She thought the unity of her church with other churches would always rest on Christ calling together all who believe. An acknowledgment of that calling inspires the Christian Science Church to respond to the invitations to dialogue and cooperate in ecumenical settings at this time.

Seeking healing from a long history of primarily negative press and gross distortions of Christian Science in textbooks and public sermons, it is a welcome sign of the times that Christian Science is invited to participate in ecumenical dialogue and in relations with other religions and faith traditions. While there are, no doubt, individual Christian Scientists who react with anger or fear toward those who oppose Christian Science, the leadership of the Church is committed to responding to all criticism and attacks in a truly Christian manner.

Theologically Christian Science participates in both ecumenical and interreligious settings with ease, because it embraces all humanity within the realm of God’s love. While the Christian Science Church acknowledges distinct differences from mainline Christianity, a more active mutual engagement with the spirit of Christ will help non-Christian Scientists understand the meaning and logic of these differences. The mission of the Christian Science Church is to serve, heal, and bless humanity, and therefore proselytization is useless to its purpose. Anyone is free to receive the blessings of Christian Science without embracing the Christian Science faith.

Christian traditions and other living faiths are worthy of respect, support, and earnest prayer for their well-being. How earnestly we pray with our Christian brothers and sisters the prayer of Jesus for his followers: “that they may all be one ... so that the world may

believe that you have sent me.”²⁷ May this paper on the self-understanding of Christian Science contribute to more practical and blessed ecumenical relationships.

¹ Mary Baker Eddy, *Pulpit and Press*, Boston, MA: The Christian Science Board of Directors, 1895; copyright renewed 1923, 22.

² Mary Baker Eddy, *Unity of Good*, Boston, MA: The Christian Science Board of Directors, 1887; copyright renewed 1915, 1936, 10.

³ Mary Baker Eddy, *Church Manual of The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1895; copyright renewed 1936.

⁴ Mary Baker Eddy, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November 25, 1908. The full sentence in this lead editorial in the first edition of the *Monitor* reads: “The object of the *Monitor* is to injure no man, but to bless all mankind.”

⁵ Mary Baker Eddy, *Christian Science versus Pantheism*, Boston, MA: The Christian Science Board of Directors, 1898; copyright renewed 1926, 14.

⁶ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1875; reprint 1994; hereafter also cited as *Science and Health*, 497.

⁷ There are several versions of the Apostles’ Creed. The version closest to Christian Science theology is the Methodist version:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic [meaning, ‘all-embracing’] church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

⁸ Contemporary spelling: ‘Wayshower’.

⁹ Romans 8:8-10, *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. All biblical passages in this paper are taken from this version.

¹⁰ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 583.

¹² *Ibid*, 333.

¹³ *Ibid*, 331-332.

¹⁴ Contemporary paraphrase of statement by Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896*, Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 2000, 162.

¹⁵ An example of Eddy’s understanding of ‘at-one-ment’ is in her book, *Science and Health*: “Every pang of repentance and suffering, every effort for reform, every good thought and deed, will help us to understand Jesus’ atonement for sin and aid its efficacy; but if the sinner continues to pray and repent, sin and be sorry, he has little part in the atonement, — in the at-one-ment with God, — for he lacks the practical repentance, which reforms the heart and enables man to do the will of wisdom” 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 333.

¹⁷ Luke 3:16, 17.

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:5.

¹⁹ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 35.

-
- ²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:26.
²¹ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 12.
²² Romans 8:7.
²³ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 497.
²⁴ Hebrews 7:19.
²⁵ Eddy, *Christian Science versus Pantheism*, 13.
²⁶ Ephesians 2:14.
²⁷ John 17:21.