The Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Scientists)


One of the most remarkable women to appear on the American horizon during the nineteenth century was the discoverer, founder, and leader of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. While Ellen G. White was a cofounder of one of the major denominations in America, Mary Baker Eddy was the only woman in Christian history to be the sole founder of a religious society that has continued to grow in this country and has expanded into many other parts of the world.

This gifted individual, who founded one of the most unusual religious systems in Christendom, was born on July 16, 1821 in Bow, New Hampshire, a small farm community located a few miles south of Concord. Mary was the youngest child in a family of three girls and three boys. Her parents were highly respected in the communities where they lived and were devoted to the Congregational Church. At the age of seventeen Mary united with that faith even though she did not endorse the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and unconditional election. On one occasion, as she considered the belief that the nonelect would be perpetually banished from God, she became highly perturbed. Her deep emotions led to such apparent sickness that the family doctor was summoned. Diagnosing her condition, he observed that she was “stricken with fever.” After praying to the Lord, however, Mary Baker testified that “a soft glow of ineffable joy” encompassed her and the fever departed.1

During her youth, while living in Tilton, New Hampshire, about seventy-five miles from Portland, Maine (the home of Ellen G. White), she showed a genuine interest in intellectual and spiritual themes. And, like Ellen G. White, her childhood was marred by continual illness. Although Mary Baker’s education was occasionally interrupted because of her ill health, she studied at home, leaned quickly, and possessed an unusual memory. Unlike Ellen G. White, however, Mary Baker had several years of formal education in academies and received periodic instruction from private tutors. Her favorite subjects were natural philosophy, logic, and moral science, and she obtained a few lessons in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.2

Mary Baker Eddy recalled that when she was about eight over the period of about one year she periodically heard a voice, which repeated, “Mary.” At times she thought her mother was calling, but upon learning that she had not been summoned, she became discouraged, and her mother was perplexed. After reading the narrative of Samuel in the Old Testament, Mary said she understood that the voice was of God. After this the call was not repeated “again to the material senses.”3

Early in life she gained a desire to write, and during her adolescent years contributed many poems and articles to local papers. It was also at an early age that she remarked that one day she would write a book. Undoubtedly, however, the young woman did not perceive at that time the tremendous influence her work would have on the lives of countless followers.

One of the most significant aspects of her early life that undoubtedly played a major role in her becoming a spiritual leader was her constant suffering from various forms of illness. Her parents turned to many medical doctors, attempting to secure relief for their daughter. Eventually, she was exposed to a variety of healing programs, including exercises of faith and mesmeric practices of that age.

In addition to her protracted illness, her marital hardships undoubtedly caused her to seek relief from suffering. In 1843 she married George W. Glover and was widowed the following year and left with inadequate financial support. After returning to her parents’ home and giving birth to her only child, she felt compelled to locate another woman to nurse and raise her son. Later, hoping to regain her boy, she married Daniel Patterson, a dentist and homeopathist. But this union failed to result in a lasting bond of love between husband and wife or an intimate relationship between mother and son. After frequent quarrelling, the marriage ended in divorce in 1873. After inaugurating the Christian Science movement, she was again married, to one of her students, Asa G. Eddy, who died in 1882, five years after their wedding. Mrs. Eddy, finally, did win the respect of her son George Glover, toward the end of her life.

During her unpleasant marriage to the itinerant dentist, Mary Baker Patterson sought help from a faith healer, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, who resided in Maine. While under his care, she secured some relief from her ailments and became genuinely interested in the mental origin of disease.

In February, 1866, shortly after the death of this “magnetic doctor,” Mrs. Eddy slipped on an icy street in the manufacturing community of Lynn, Massachusetts, and

---


3 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
sustained a painful injury. An attending physician pronounced the injury fatal but three days after the accident she opened her Bible to a description of one of the Savior’s miraculous healings: “And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed; and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee” (Matthew 9:2). As Mrs. Eddy read, she testified that “the healing Truth dawned upon” her. Subsequently, she continued, “I rose, dressed myself, and ever after was in better health than I had before enjoyed.” Although the healing was not permanent and she required therapy following this discovery, a definite change had taken place in her pattern of belief. As Eddy recalled, in 1866 “I discovered the Science of divine metaphysical healing which I afterwards named Christian Science… I named it Christian, because it is compassionate, helpful, and spiritual.” For twenty years prior to this accident, she had been trying to trace physical effects to a mental cause, but following her recovery she decided that all causation was Mind, and every effect a mental phenomenon.

For three years following her healing, she withdrew from society to ponder her mission in life, to study the Bible, and to develop a new religious system. Employing the Bible as a basic text, Eddy unfolded an unusual interpretation of the scriptures, revealing the teachings of Jesus and his accomplishments in light of what she called “the Principle and rule of spiritual Science and metaphysical healing.”

One of the doctrines presented by Eddy that helps inquirers better understand the pattern of belief of this religious community was her unique concept of God. While describing the unlimited nature of God’s presence, the founder of Christian Science emphasized that “God is All-in-all.” According to her convictions, “From this it follows that nothing possesses reality nor existence except the divine Mind and His ideas.” She also believed that God is Spirit, pure Love, and pure good, and she reasoned that since God “fills all space” and all is spirit and spiritual then the opposite of these characteristics do not really exist. Therefore, Eddy concluded that sin, sickness, matter, and death are unreal.

As her novel religious system emerged, Eddy adopted unusual definitions of terms which sometimes create semantic problems when individuals not of this faith communicate with Christian Scientists. In defining various terms, she wrote:

God I called immortal Mind. That which sins, suffers, and dies, I named mortal mind. The physical senses, or sensuous nature, I called error and shadow. Soul I denominated substance, because Soul alone is truly substantial. God I characterized as individual entity, but his corporeality I denied. The real I claimed as eternal; and its antipodes, or the temporal, I described as unreal.

Spirit I called the reality; and matter, the unreality. Although many critics of the Christian Science faith point out parallels in the teachings of Quimby and Eddy, Christian Scientists emphasize the differences between their beliefs. Whereas Quimby and many others interested in “mind-cure” concentrated on mind-over-matter with the healing power generated by the individual, Eddy taught that the power that heals comes from God and his influence on consciousness. As explained by Christian Scientists, Quimby stressed personal will and Eddy concentrated on the influence of what she considered God’s “Truth” on the thinking of mankind.

Another significant difference in the teachings of Eddy and Quimby is that she viewed creation as “wholly spiritual.” As one expositor of Christian Science stated, the need is to “recognize the immutable perfection of Mind’s spiritual creation, which could not possibly permit the presence of anything contrary to its own nature.” The result, he added, of this “yielding to the divine Mind” is inevitably healing, “a radical changing of the evidence before the senses.” As explained by Eddy,

What is the cardinal point of the difference in my metaphysical system? This: that by knowing the unreality of disease, sin, and death, you demonstrate the illniss of God. This difference wholly separates my system from all others. The reality of these so-called existences I deny, because they are not to be found in God, and this system is built on Him as the sole cause. It would be difficult to name any previous teachers, save Jesus and his apostles, who have thus taught.

In the view of Christian Scientists, disease and pain are mental, not material. They are said to arise from a false concept of existence, and it is held that when an individual learns that sickness and suffering are not God-created and therefore are mortal and illusory, they disappear from his experience. According to this teaching, what appears to be physical healing is really the wiping out of a false belief that disease is real.

“Man’s belief produces disease and all its symptoms,” Mary Baker Eddy asserted. “We weep because others weep, we yawn because they yawn, and we have small-pox because others have it; but mortal mind, not matter, contains and carries the infection.”

After studying, writing, and discussing her religious views with boarders in homes where she resided, Eddy organized her first school in 1870, in Lynn, Massachusetts, thereby commencing a career of healing and teaching. To provide for her support, she charged students who could afford to pay a tuition; graduates who subsequently engaged in spiritual healing agreed to pay heir tutor ten percent of their income. Shortly after instituting a formal program of instruction, Eddy purchased a home in Lynn, where she

5 Eddy, Retrospection and Introspection, p.24.
6 Ibid., p. 25.
7 Mary Baker Eddy, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1934), pp. 331–32.
8 Eddy, Retrospection and Introspection, p. 25.
continued conducting classes.

The basic beliefs of Mary Baker Eddy were widely circulated in what became known as the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. This work was originally published in 1875 and has gone through many revisions and editions, but the basic theology unfolded in this influential treatise has not been changed. Although Eddy taught that the Bible is the only authority for religious truth and a sufficient guide to eternal life, she claimed that men have altered the original text and have developed erroneous interpretations of the scripture. Her textbook, *Science and Health*, does not in the view of Christian Scientists supersede the Bible but is a guide unlocking biblical truths. Moreover, this book is regarded as a complete statement of Christian Science, and like the Bible in its original form, contains “nothing of human opinion” and is “devoid of man made theories.”

In the same year that the first edition of the Christian Science textbook was printed, Sunday services were held in private homes, consisting primarily of a sermon by Eddy, prayers, and hymns. For many months, the gatherings remained small, usually numbering fewer than twenty. Although few converts had been gathered, in 1879 about twenty-six people assembled in Boston and endorsed Eddy’s proposal to establish a church which was named the “Church of Christ, Scientist.” Shortly thereafter these members extended a call to Eddy to be their pastor and in 1881 she was ordained.

In the decade following the organization of this religious community, Eddy founded the Massachusetts Metaphysical College, published and edited *The Christian Science Journal*, and changed the Sunday services from the afternoon to the morning, so that the society would no longer be considered subordinate to any other denomination. In the 1890s, Eddy reorganized the church, prepared a church manual describing the procedure of church government, and delivered her last public sermon. Although Eddy’s last appearance behind a pulpit took place on January 5, 1896, this influential woman continued to direct the affairs of the church through written messages after her retirement.

One of the last accomplishments of Mary Baker Eddy was the founding in 1908 of the internationally known *Christian Science Monitor*. Two years after initiating this newspaper, on December 3, 1910, the eighty-nine-year-old founder of one of America’s most unusual religious societies died, leaving a church with a membership of nearly 100,000 and an estate worth 2.5 million dollars.

Sunday services of this religious community are different from those held in many other Christian churches. There are no pastors and no sermons delivered from the pulpits on their Sabbath day. A First and a Second Reader, however, read selections from the Bible and *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. These “lesson-sermons,” covering twenty-six subjects, are published in advance of the meeting, are studied by members the week before they are read at the Sunday service, and are uniformly presented in the various branches located throughout the world. Services also include congregational singing (no choirs), a song by a professional vocalist, silent prayer, and the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer with Eddy’s spiritual interpretation of it.

On Wednesday, at noon or in the evening, another meeting is held, in which members testify of their healing experiences and describe how they have benefited from the application of the principles unfolded by the author of *Science and Health*.

Throughout the history of this denomination, world headquarters have been located in Boston, Massachusetts. Envisioning that the central or “mother” church would draw members from various countries, Eddy reorganized her church under a title that has continued to the present day, “The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts.” The central government of the Mother Church consists of a board of directors who were originally appointed by Eddy and then became a self-perpetuating body. These men and women have the responsibility of administering church affairs according to the constitution and laws published in Eddy’s *Manual of the Mother Church*. Another national group of administrators, known as the Board of Trustees, has the responsibility of supervising the publishing activities of the denomination.

While Christian Scientists living throughout the world may become members of the Mother Church, they also maintain membership in one of the 3,300 branches located in more than fifty countries. Each branch is an independent, self-governing body. In this essentially democratic polity, members elect a rotating board of directors who manage local ecclesiastical affairs according to the guidelines found in The Mother Church manual. The two Readers are also elected by the membership from among their own number.

Currently this church publishes a weekly periodical, *The Christian Science Sentinel*; a monthly periodical, *The Christian Science Journal*; a foreign periodical, *The Christian Science Herald*; and continues to publish its daily newspaper, *The Christian Science Monitor*. The society also authorizes thousands of Christian Science practitioners to assist individuals in applying the beliefs of their faith to illness and other problems afflicting mankind. Repudiating the principles governing the actions of medical doctors (including treatment in hospitals), Christian Scientists turn to practitioners for assistance. After demonstrating evidence of successful work of healing, practitioners are registered by the officers of the Mother Church at Boston; these men and women continue to heal what they classify as “human errors and ills.”

While members of this faith may seek the special skills of doctors for childbirth, secure the services of dentists, and ask for medical help following a bone fracture, they insist that

---

13 Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection*, p. 16.
16 Ibid., pp. 194–96, 223.
correct application of Christian Science would eliminate the need for these specialists. Many members testify, for example, that broken bones following accidents have mended perfectly without the aid of medical doctors. These Christians are also opposed to compulsory vaccination for their members on the ground that such laws infringe upon their religious convictions. Believing in obeying the laws of the land, however, they comply with the statutes which are enacted and enforced.

It is incorrect to say that Christian Science is a religion which concentrates only on helping those with physical illness, for members of this denomination teach that their religion gives relevant answers concerning life and salvation, including man’s preexistence and the road to an eternal life with God. The proper implementation of this Science, they add, will not only heal people of sickness and sin, but of forms of discord. One of the central themes which Christian Scientists are proclaiming to the world is that all problems of society can be resolved through proper utilization of spiritual power.

Distinguishing Beliefs

While many Americans associate the Christian Science faith with a system of healing, the teachings of this church encompass a wide spectrum of religious thought. Partly because members of this faith have adopted unique definitions for many terms, the teachings of the Christian Scientists are difficult for the average American to comprehend. After inquirers learn a few basic concepts held by these Christians, however, their doctrines and practices seem less confusing.

One of the best approaches to an understanding of Christian Science belief is to begin with their unusual concept of God. Members of this religious community teach that “Life, Truth and Love constitute the triune Person called God.” This one God is a Spirit, they explain, and is supreme good, is love, and is “multiform in office: God the Father-Mother; Christ sent the spiritual idea of sonship; divine Science or the Holy Comforter.” They say that the supreme Deity is probably called “Father-Mother” because this name identifies God’s “tender relationship to His spiritual creation.” They further hold that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, was the reflection of God, was appointed to speak God’s word to humanity in a form which man could understand, and expressed the Christ, the true idea voicing good to man. They do not believe, however, that Jesus and Christ are synonyms, for they say Jesus is the name of the human man and Christ refers to the divine idea.

Christian Scientists also teach that the “Scriptures imply that God is All-in-all” and “declare that God is spirit.” Therefore, they explain that “in Spirit all is harmony, and there can be no discord; all is Life, and there is no death.... He fills all space, and it is impossible to conceive of such omnipresence and individuality except as infinite Spirit or Mind. Hence all is Spirit and spiritual.” Therefore, Christian Scientists insist that sin, sickness, matter, pain, and death are illusions of the mind or misconceptions of man.

Although Christian Scientists teach that the Bible is a sufficient guide to eternal life, they maintain that their publication Science and Health serves as a guide for a proper interpretation of the Bible.

According to members of this religious community, the Genesis account of the creation and fall of Adam is an allegory, a myth, or a dream narrative. Adam was not created a mortal being by God, they add, for “the mortality of man is a myth”; and, since man is immortal, man was never born. The belief that spirit was submerged in matter to be emancipated at a future date is considered erroneous. Adam is regarded as the scriptural term for error and stands for a belief of material mind. Since God, they reason, is eternal and made all that was created, they state that “man and the spiritual universe coexist with God.”

Another distinguishing belief of these Christians is that salvation is understanding God and demonstrating one’s convictions by surmounting sin, sickness, and death.

While describing life beyond the grave, Christian Scientists teach that there is no death, meaning that life is indestructible; man, they say, in his real definition, is never separate from his maker. In their opinion, since God is eternal, so is man. Death is sometimes compared to another incident in the dream of mortality or another experience of mortal mind. “The sinner makes his own hell by doing evil,” Mrs. Eddy declared, “and the saint his own heaven by doing right.” While our thoughts are evil, she continued, we are in hell, which is a self-imposed agony, a self-inflicted belief in sin, sickness, death, and suffering. As we come close to God in thought, we experience more of that spiritual harmony which is heaven. And, she concluded, there is no final judgment, for “the judgment-day of wisdom comes hourly and continually, even the judgment by which mortal man is divested of all material error.”

There are no physical sacraments in this church. Baptism is considered as a continuous act, a perpetual purification from all error; and twice a year, active members participate in a communion service. Instead of partaking of bread and wine, which is part of the regular sabbath service activity, during this semiannual meeting Christian Scientists commune silently with God.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

Like many other Christians, Christian Scientists also believe in daily prayer, frequent communication with deity, and living a life governed by the principle of love.

---

17 Eddy, Science and Health, pp. 331–33.
18 Ibid., p. 331.
19 Ibid., pp. 73, 267, 529–31, 545–46.
20 Ibid., p. 593.
21 Ibid., pp. 266, 291, 588.