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# Christian Science and Health Care

by Dale W. Ferguson, C.S.B.

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*From the vantage point of an increasingly technological medical culture, an environment that both Christian Scientists and health care professionals can embrace may seem an unlikely prospect. However, with growing recognition of mental and spiritual factors in health and wider appreciation that human beings are not merely, or mainly, biochemical mechanisms, there is possibility for consensus.*

*The purpose of this article is to explain some of the moral, theological and practical bases upon which Christian Scientists make their health care decisions. By bridging the knowledge gap between health care professionals and Christian Scientists, we can foster a spirit of cooperation and understanding.*

The "conventional wisdom has little patience with 'non-conformists,'" a physician wrote in a letter to a Christian Scientist. The non-conformity of Christian Scientists in health care has been a subject of debate in the medical community for many years. Yet this non-conformity, the physician pointed out, does not preclude dialogue but rather necessitates it: "I hope this dialogue can be conducted in a collegial fashion, and that we both may learn from the other . . . who knows, perhaps someday it may all sort out into an environment that you and I can both embrace."

This commentary is offered in the same spirit. While I write as one personally committed to the religious values under discussion, I recognize the honest concerns expressed by many health care professionals about Christian Science healing practice and appreciate the opportunity to help bridge the knowledge gap between us. My purpose is simply to explain something of the moral, theological and practical basis upon which Christian Scientists make their medical decisions, to help health care providers sort out their own professional and moral responsibilities toward Christian Scientists.

From the vantage point of an increasingly technological medical culture, an environment that both Christian Scientists and physicians can "embrace" may seem an unlikely prospect. In many ways, the gulf between Christian Science and the medical profession is becoming more difficult rather than easier to bridge. Several recent criminal prosecutions

brought against Christian Science parents for their reliance on prayer underscore this point. Several physicians' organizations have issued pronouncements highly critical of reliance on prayer as a mode of therapy outside conventional medical care.

At the same time, those on both sides of this gulf share a common motive "to do all one can to relieve human suffering," as a pediatrician who left her hospital practice to devote herself to Christian Science healing recently put it.<sup>1</sup> There are also developments in modern medicine itself that point to new possibilities for consensus: expanding recognition of the importance of mental and spiritual factors in health; more realism about problems in medical care itself; growing rejection of medical paternalism in making decisions; and most profoundly, perhaps, some questioning of the limited view of the human being as merely, or mainly, a biochemical mechanism.

## A Theology of Healing

Christian Science is a religion based on the words and works of Jesus Christ. Though its historical roots are Protestant, its emphasis on Christ's works, particularly on following his example in healing through God's presence and love, has distinguished its practice from that of the mainline churches.

Underlying this emphasis is the conviction that the tendency to "separate health and healing, compassion and caring, from the religious life of mankind . . . is self-defeating. Christ Jesus, whom Christians take as their supreme example, was a healer. His was not an abstract theology or philosophy. He preached that the kingdom of God is at hand; he

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quicken people's moral sense and linked these spiritual truths to safety and health."<sup>2</sup>

This viewpoint neither embraces fundamentalism nor interprets the New Testament narratives merely as premodern myth. Christian Scientists are not word-for-word literalists about the Bible, so they do not object to teaching evolution in public schools. Some have been quite distinguished physical scientists and scholars. But the Bible remains an irreplaceable source of spiritual "food" and light in their lives, and most read and study it daily. They

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see it less as a book of doctrines than one of profound insight into the nature of God; insight that remains contemporary and, for Christian Scientists, central to healing.

The denomination's origin and development help explain this linkage. The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), was a New England woman who wrestled with the Calvinist doctrines in which she was raised even as she wholeheartedly embraced Christianity itself. Chronic illness marred much of her early womanhood, but long before she established a new denomination she rebelled against the notion that sickness is sent by God or in any way reflects God's will. A religious experience of healing in 1866 brought not only renewed health but, gradually, a new theology. She devoted the rest of her life to further spiritual study, healing through prayer, teaching, organizing and pastoring a church, and writing down her findings.

As Mrs. Eddy came to see it, the practice of healing among early Christians constituted a major element of their faith that had largely faded from subsequent Christian life and needed to be rediscovered. This conviction was reflected in her Church's statement of purpose at its founding in 1879: "To commemorate the word and works of our Master [Christ Jesus], which should reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing."<sup>3</sup> The reference to "primitive Christianity" was not intended as backward-looking. On the contrary, she insisted that Christian healing, and Christianity itself, need to be understood as a "Science," that is,

as grounded in the basic laws governing reality. An understanding of these universal spiritual laws enables anyone who is willing to learn them to challenge the materially-based theories of sickness and sin and subdue them, just as Jesus and others did in the Bible. This is why Mrs. Eddy called it a "Science"; it can be proved.

Mrs. Eddy once related that it was at the urging of a physician that she started writing "a book which should explain to the world my curative system."<sup>4</sup> That book, entitled *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, was published in 1875 and serves today as the textbook of Christian Science. It puts forth a new model of prayer, rejecting what might be called the "big man in the sky" model of a God imagined as intervening irregularly in human affairs when properly implored. As Christian Scientists see it, God by His very nature must be unchanging Truth, invariable Love, operating through timeless spiritual laws rather than special miraculous acts. The most effective prayer grows out of the heart's desire to know and live this Love, which Christian Scientists see as all-encompassing.

Such prayer does not induce a reluctant God suddenly to step in and heal particular persons, a process "which could seem morally dubious" in a world of such immense and uneven suffering,<sup>5</sup> but rather opens one's heart and mind to God's always present love. This is something that doesn't always have to be put into words. It involves not pleading with God but acknowledging His presence and

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*From the Christian Science perspective, God's love operates through timeless spiritual laws rather than miracles.*

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power, His perfect love and control. As Mrs. Eddy explained: "Prayer cannot change the Science of being, but it tends to bring us into harmony with it."<sup>6</sup> Healing of the body is simply the outward effect.

Mrs. Eddy's perception of the mind-body relationship anticipated but also differed from current holistic theories. She did not see genuine prayer as a glorified placebo for those who have strong faith, or as a subtly disguised process of mental suggestion or positive thinking. Nor did she feel that the actual phenomena of healing in her own and other Christian Scientists' lives could be adequately explained in a biological framework, even one that al-

lows for the influence of psychological factors on the body. The fact that spiritual healing cuts across normal categories of physical law and causation sustained her teaching that matter itself is not the defining condition it appears to be, but is a habitual misimpression of man and creation. Man in God's image, she wrote, "is not material; he is spiritual."<sup>7</sup> Numerous scriptural references in both the Old and New Testaments allude to this perception (see Gen. 1:27, Is. 2:22, Job 14:1 and John 3:5,6). Therefore she believed Christianity redeemed man from this mortal view of separation from God, which is a sin, by bringing the true view to light. The physical healing of sickness, she said, was a small but important part of this awakening process.

### The Normalcy of Healing

From this perspective, experiences of healing through prayer are a normal and to-be-expected aspect of Christianity, not rare or exceptional events. One Christian Scientist's description fits the experience of many: "Christian Science healing in our family was certainly quiet; nothing showy about it, nothing dramatic, just warm and reassuring and fairly frequent . . . the way a God who is Love would be expected to help when you made room in your thought and life for him."<sup>8</sup> Although often misunderstood and assumed to involve an impossi-

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*Christian Science nursing care reminds us of the nursing profession's roots in the "art of hope, love and caring."*

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ble struggle to believe in the face of doubt, the actual practice of "making room" for God in one's thought and life begins to lift that strained sense of religion, and quite naturally the presence of God becomes tremendously real for those healed.

Since the turn of the century, the Church's weekly and monthly periodicals have published some 54,000 testimonies of healing, including many serious medically-diagnosed conditions that are not ordinarily considered self-limiting. Many more healings have been related in the testimony meetings every congregation holds weekly. The published testimonies "are manifestly religious rather than medical documents," a church-initiated study points out, but it is "highly implausible to assume that all or even most" of so large a body of healing

experiences can be explained away as misdiagnoses or otherwise attributed to other causes.<sup>9</sup>

Christian Scientists come from all educational levels and all walks of life, but such healings are common to almost all of them. Many I know first came to the Church because they or some member of their family, past or present, were healed through its ministry when other remedies failed. That was the case with my own family.

We lived in central Kansas, and throughout the first five years or so of my life I had serious infection problems. Our family physician was a kindly

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man and did the best he could for me. Finally, at a time when the condition worsened, he recommended that my mother take me to a hospital in Kansas City to see if specialists could be of more help. While I was there many tests and treatments were given, including the removal of my tonsils, although my tonsils had never given me any trouble.

After going home, still with the problem, a college friend of my mother's recommended Christian Science, which my parents began to study. I had treatment through prayer (Christian Scientists use the term "treatment" in reference to prayer) from a Christian Science practitioner and began on a new road to healing. That took place some sixty years ago; Christian Science became the family's way of life and has been mine since that time. I married a Christian Scientist whom I met in college. We raised two children, depending entirely upon the practice of Christian Science to meet our health needs. Both children were born at home very harmoniously without complications; doctors were employed for their delivery, as was a Christian Science nurse who helped in the early care of the infants. The children are now grown and have families of their own.

Christian Scientists approach prayer as a daily discipline for each individual. But if they feel the need for help in a given situation they call on Christian Science practitioners, who help others through prayer. After college and eighteen years in the business world, I decided to devote my entire time to this healing work. This wasn't as abrupt as it may sound, for I had been planning and preparing myself for this step for many years. There had been many healings in our family, and Christian Science

meant so much that I wanted to give something back.

After fulfilling the necessary requirements, which include providing evidence on specific healings of individuals who had called me for help through prayer, I was listed as a practitioner in the official publication of the Church, *The Christian Science Journal*. To start as a Christian Science practitioner with a young family wasn't financially easy. Practitioners are not paid by the Church but rather are paid for their services by patients, as are doctors or psychiatrists (at least as doctors or psychiatrists were paid in the era before HMOs and third-party payers). These fees are relatively modest, in line with the character of Christian Science ministry.

Most Christian Science practitioners and teachers enter this work in much the same way I did. They have been in other occupations and professions but, perhaps because of healings in their own experience or simply because of their desire to serve, have left their former work to help others as they were helped. One teacher from whom I received specific instruction in Christian Science was a former physician, the late Dr. John Tutt of Kansas City. Through Christian Science he had been healed of a serious stomach ailment, and went on to become a prominent Christian Science practitioner, teacher and lecturer. He emphasized that Christian Science had taught him the connection between healing and spiritual awakening.

That connection is also taken seriously in Christian Science nursing for patients who need physical care while receiving help through prayer. Christian Science nurses are trained to provide non-medical practical services: professional bed care, cleansing and bandaging wounds, ambulatory help and so forth. Some provide home care while others serve at Christian Science facilities for those who cannot remain at home. These facilities are recognized by the laws of the states in which they are located and also in the Medicare provisions of the Social Security system. In an age when hospital treatment has become increasingly technical, Christian Science nursing has been described by one medical nursing instructor as a reminder of the nursing profession's roots in the "art of hope, love and caring."<sup>10</sup>

### The Legal Aspect of Christian Science

The practice of Christian Science healing is a legally protected activity because it is an integral part of the religion of Christian Science and therefore a form of religious worship. It is protected under the Constitution of the United States. State laws, which define and regulate the practice of medicine, contain provisions that exclude Christian Science from

medical practice. Missouri statute 334.150 reads: "Sections 334.010 to 334.140 shall not apply to Christian Science practitioners who endeavor to cure or prevent disease or suffering exclusively by spiritual means or prayer, so long as quarantine regulations relating to contagious diseases are not infringed upon."

While the faithful rely entirely upon Christian Science in lieu of the medical approach for preventing and healing disease, they respect the conscientious efforts of medical and public health authorities. Christian Scientists neither quarrel over nor oppose customary public health requirements, but fully support public health measures through the practice of their religion. Both prevention and cure of disease are given careful attention by Christian Scientists. And they have a good reputation for observing and supporting public health practices of sanitation, isolation and quarantine, as circumstances may require. They don't ignore disease and are careful to avoid exposing others. As required by law, they report cases of contagious disease to public health authorities.

The most difficult cases, ethically as well as legally, relate to care of children. Where medical treatment for minor children is required by law, Christian Scientists are strictly obedient; but in such areas they seek legal recognition of their right to rely wholly on Christian Science healing for themselves and their children. For example, all states properly make it a crime to endanger the life of a child. Laws call for adequate food, clothing, shelter and medical care. However, most states include provisions in child abuse and neglect statutes that declare children are not considered endangered if cared for by non-medical remedial means permitted under state law. Over the years Christian Scientists have been granted these accommodations. However, as mentioned earlier, they have been challenged in some recent court cases. But Christian Scientists have a commendable record in caring for their children's health and a strong history of cooperating with public health officials. There is no evidence that Christian Scientists lose children disproportionately to other groups in the population.

Most states provide exemption from immunization requirements for medical and religious reasons. Christian Science parents generally ask for such exemption. Exceptions might occur if one parent were not a Christian Scientist or immunization were required to enter certain countries. But prayer is always regarded as the prime means of protection and healing. During an epidemic Christian Science children who are not vaccinated willingly stay at home if asked or told to do so.

State laws that govern nursing homes contain health standards for residents. Provisions, such as the following in Missouri statute 198.042, have been incorporated into state laws giving Christian Scientists the right to rely on prayer alone in practicing their religion: "Nothing in sections 198.003 to 198.096, or the rules and regulations adopted pursuant thereto, shall be construed as authorizing the

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medical supervision, regulation or control of the remedial care or treatment of those residents who rely solely upon treatment by prayer or spiritual means in accordance with creed or tenets of any well-recognized church or religious denomination." Christian Scientists who do not wish to receive medical care or treatment can complete a living will to express that desire.

### **The Ethics of Christian Science Healing**

I have tried to convey from my own experience some of the reasons people become Christian Scientists, and the support available to them when challenged by sickness. In my ministry as a Christian Science practitioner for the past twenty-four years, I have dealt with a great variety of cases: physical, financial, mental, family and relationship problems. Many of these calls for help were not from Christian Scientists. I find many people today hunger for a more spiritual sense of life than is typically reflected in the health care system. Mostly they are afraid. They question their identity and relationship to God. Nothing material can provide answers.

I have found that sickness is usually an outward sign of an inner separation from God or good. Through directed study of the Bible, the writings of Christian Science and prayer, a practitioner helps his patients to find within themselves that "God is an ever-present help in trouble." This study enables them to better understand God, themselves, and spiritual truth manifest in the works of Jesus, the consummate healer. Fear is always the main culprit, and when patients begin to lose their fear of disease (or of whatever troubles them) and align their thoughts and lives with God, their healing comes about.

In observing individuals and families over the years, I can see that one of the greatest blessings Christian Science provides in relation to health care is its preventive capacity. Healings, of course, are important. But the daily instruction that Christian Scientists receive in the God-power that is ever available to cope with the evils of the world confers a freedom and a direction that is not realized in ordinary ways. Christian Scientists are not disease oriented. They think less about disease and consequently are less influenced by the indoctrination of disease theory that goes on daily in public thought. Mrs. Eddy, recognizing this suggestive tendency of the human mind, wrote: "The press unwittingly sends forth many sorrows and diseases among the human family. It does this by giving names to diseases and by printing long descriptions which mirror images of disease distinctly in thought. A new name for an ailment affects people like a Parisian name for a novel garment. Every one hastens to get it."<sup>11</sup> This doesn't mean that Christian Scientists do not have problems or ignore disease, but should accident or illness happen they are usually dealt with quickly because of the believer's daily spiritual preparation. I often imagine what a marvelous impact such thinking could have on a world so troubled about health care.

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I want to emphasize that Christian Scientists do not disparage the work of health care professionals. We recognize that they are dedicated people and are needed by those who depend on their mode of treatment. Christian Scientists don't ordinarily seek to combine their practice of spiritual healing with medical care, however, because we see the two as starting from opposite standpoints. In the spirit of the Biblical adage that "a man cannot serve two masters," we believe the practice of spiritual healing is most effective when entered into fully and wholeheartedly rather than in the context of primary reliance on medical care.

Yet this is not to suggest that prayer can't help those who seek medical care. No praying person would take that view, and probably even non-religious physicians would acknowledge that prayer can help in comforting patients. But in practical terms conventional medicine treats disease on a

physical and chemical basis and accepts prayer more as a last resort than as a viable mode of treatment. Medicine focuses intensely on the body, hence it does not mix well with a way of life and a way of healing that centers undividedly on God and the spiritual nature of persons. Deeply as we respect the good represented in the medical community, the argument that "God established medicine to help humanity" doesn't seem particularly persuasive from Christian Scientists' perspective, for it begs the question of why God would have consented to so much suffering in the first place.

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*Conventional medicine treats disease on a physical basis and accepts treatment through prayer as a last resort.*

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It is sometimes asked if the Christian Science church forces or pressures its members to forgo medical care. The answer is no, it does not. Commitment to reliance on God for healing is a requirement for joining the Church, but it would be contrary to the ethics of Christian Science to dictate decisions that rightfully belong to the individual. Each member is a free moral agent who may choose the path that seems best to him or her in any given circumstance. Some members have sought medical care in cases when healing has not been effected after a time through prayer. But in many other cases, healings of even serious conditions have resulted as persistence in prayer has brought spiritual breakthroughs and deeper awareness of God.

Those who resort temporarily to medical means are not dropped from membership but rather are encouraged to continue growing in spiritual understanding. In one case I know personally, for instance, a man had skin cancer for which he initially sought Christian Science treatment, but under pressure from concerned family members he eventually had surgically removed. Not long thereafter the condition returned and he again resorted to surgery. When the condition returned yet again, he decided to devote himself more fully to prayer regardless of the time required for healing. It took about a year, but the healing came and he had no further recurrence. As in many such cases, the man stated that he felt even more gratitude for the renewed spiritual sense of life that came with the experience than for the physical healing itself.

Three areas in which Christian Scientists interact more regularly with the medical professions are childbirth, setting broken bones, and reporting suspected contagious disease. In each of these areas we try to approach relationships with health care professionals on the basis of the Golden Rule: respecting their conscience and professional responsibility as fully as we can, just as we ask them to respect our convictions as fully as they can. Christian Scientists have been grateful for the tolerance as well as kindness of physicians who have attended them over the years and hope these non-adversarial relationships will not be a casualty of current legal efforts to repress spiritual healing.

The relationships between Christian Science mothers and the physicians or midwives delivering their babies have often typified the pragmatic give-and-take that is possible when these matters are approached with mutual respect. For instance, Christian Scientists appreciate the tolerance of physicians in generally forgoing the use of drugs and not pressing for Caesareans. While cooperative in difficult situations and when complications in a pregnancy arise, it hasn't been unusual for Christian Scientists to request and receive additional time in which to work out such problems through prayer.

One recent example involved a Christian Science mother faced with a life-threatening loss of blood after giving birth. The mother, herself a head nurse in obstetrics and gynecology before she became a Christian Scientist, requested a few minutes to pray as her husband consulted the Christian Science practitioner. She was given more time as her condition noticeably improved. According to her account, she "wanted to respect [the doctor's] concern and be as cooperative as possible without merely surrendering my convictions or my rights as a competent adult." Within several hours emergency surgery was cancelled and she was released from the hospital.<sup>12</sup>

Because the setting of broken bones involves an essentially mechanical procedure, Christian Scientists see it in a somewhat different category than drug therapy or other kinds of surgery. The same is true of dental procedures such as cleaning and repair of teeth. (There are practicing dentists who are Christian Scientists.) Christian Scientists make their own individual choices in these areas as well, and there have been many medically confirmed cases in which even serious fractures have been healed entirely through prayer in a time period so short as to be inexplicable by natural recuperative processes.

In one example reported by the *Christian Science Sentinel*, a California woman was healed within days of a broken neck described by physicians as

necessitating major surgery and months of immobilization.<sup>13</sup> Frankly, many Christian Scientists might not have made the choice she did to seek release from a hospital despite both verbal and written warnings that even slight movement could cause permanent paralysis. However, she was cared for with due caution at the Christian Science care facility where she was transferred, and her decision was made (as even the hospital nurses noted) not in an attitude of fanaticism but after calm and prayerful deliberation. Such experiences show why Christian Scientists feel that each individual's right to be guided by God in making health care decisions must be firmly established as a premise of medical ethics.

### Conclusion

It has not been my desire to present an idealized picture of Christian Scientists' experience. There have obviously been instances when healing hasn't come, when Christian Scientists' decisions can be challenged, when circumstances have overwhelmed their ability actually to demonstrate the healing they see as possible through prayer. Christian Scientists simply insist that these issues cannot be approached as though the countless healings in their experience had not happened, or as though their practice of healing could be equated with "doing nothing," or as though their past history in raising families were negligible. With some recognition of what this long experience means to Christian Scientists, it is our hope that constructive ethical dialogue can begin.

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