

Men's Discipleship

False Religions: Christian Science Part 2

II. History of Christian Science

1. Origins

How was Mary Baker Eddy injured? The pivotal event in Mary Baker Eddy's life occurred in **February 1866** in Lynn, Massachusetts. Eddy (then known as Mary Patterson) slipped on an icy sidewalk and suffered a severe fall. Contemporary accounts say she hit her head and sustained serious internal injuries. She was in critical condition – **“her injuries were pronounced fatal by the doctors”** at the time preciousseed.org. In other words, medical opinion gave her only a few days to live (internal injuries and spinal trauma). Eddy was bedridden, in great pain and fearing death.

It's worth noting that **prior** to this accident, Eddy had already been exploring alternative healing ideas. In 1864 she had visited **Phineas P. Quimby**, a mental healer in Maine famous for his “mind cure” methods. Quimby taught her principles of *mental healing* – essentially the idea that illness is caused by erroneous beliefs and can be cured by correcting one's thinking. ligonier.org. Eddy was intrigued by these teachings, and this background primed her for what happened after her 1866 fall.

How did she believe she was healed? Lying on her sickbed after the fall, Eddy requested that the Bible be brought to her. On **February 3, 1866**, she read the account of one of Jesus' healings – the story of the paralyzed man in *Matthew 9:2–8*. As she read, Eddy later recounted, **she experienced a sudden spiritual illumination**. She claimed that *she heard God's voice* telling her to rise. In that moment, she *stood up from her bed, fully healed* preciousseed.org. According to her report, she immediately felt no pain and astonished onlookers by walking. Eddy described this as a miraculous recovery: “*I instantly felt the healing power of Truth... and rose, taking up my bed and walking,*” she wrote later, alluding to Jesus' words to the paralytic. Whether or not there was dramatic instant healing (some historical witnesses have debated the details), **Eddy became convinced that spiritual understanding had cured her** where conventional medicine failed. This event – occurring just three days after her injury – was seen by Eddy as the turning point of her life.

What insight did she believe she received? Eddy believed that in that miraculous moment, God had revealed to her a great *Principle*: a **divine law of healing**. Over the next three years (1866–1869), she devoted herself to studying the Bible considering this revelation and experimenting with healing others. She concluded that **illness is not a physical reality at all, but an illusion produced by faulty beliefs**. The insight she claimed was that the original **Christian healing** practiced by Jesus and the apostles was based on a scientific spiritual truth: *Spirit* is the only reality, and by knowing this truth, one can dispel the illusions of sickness and sin. She later wrote that “*the divine Principle of man remains perfect... the divine idea or reflection (man) remains indestructible and perfect*”, meaning our true being is spiritual and unharmed. learn.ligonier.org.

In Eddy's view, Jesus had healed people by realizing the unreality of their ailments – effectively **applying “Divine Science”**. She believed God had chosen her to rediscover and explain this healing truth to the world. Following her recovery, “*she was determined to devote her life to the healing element of religion*”, and she did exactly that. preciousseed.org. Eddy **opened a healing practice**, treating others through prayer and mental techniques. She also **taught students** her methods (one of her early students, Asa Gilbert Eddy, even became her husband). Crucially, she **began writing down** her ideas – working on a manuscript that would later become her major book. By 1870, she was referring to her system as “Christian Science.” In Eddy's mind, this wasn't a *new* religion but a restoration of genuine Christian healing truth. She felt she had received a **revelation** of how Jesus healed the sick – not through supernatural miracles, but through understanding the scientific reality of God and man.

Synopsis of her two primary writings:

- Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (first published 1875):** This is the **central text** of Christian Science. Mary Baker Eddy considered it the definitive explanation of the Bible's spiritual message. Christian Scientists treat *Science and Health* almost as a companion to (or interpretation of) the Bible – it is read alongside Scripture in their services and studied daily. The book sets forth Eddy's *metaphysical theology* and healing method. **Major teachings** from *Science and Health* include: God is not a personal deity but the impersonal “**divine Principle**”, synonymous with Mind, Soul, Life, Truth, Love. coldcasechristianity.com. All reality is spiritual; the material world is illusory – “*the material world is an illusion*” and what we perceive as matter, including sickness and even death, is a false belief of the mortal mind. en.wikipedia.org. Humanity's true nature is God's spiritual *idea*, untouched by sin or disease. Eddy reinterprets key Christian doctrines in this book. For example, she denies the Trinity (calling it polytheistic) and the deity of Christ – presenting “**Jesus as the human man and Christ as the divine idea**”, not God in flesh. rpcnacovenant.com. She explains the Atonement not as Jesus shedding blood for sin, but as the way **divine Truth** overcomes error in our lives. wels.net. She even argues that Jesus *did not actually die* on the cross the way people think, but that his spirit overcame the belief of death – thus the Resurrection was, in her view, more of a **mental demonstration** than a physical resuscitation. learn.ligonier.org. In sum, *Science and Health* lays out a **complete metaphysical system**: sin, sickness, and death are unreal errors; prayer is a “**scientific**” process of denying those errors and affirming spiritual truth; and healing is the natural result of aligning thought with God (Mind). “Man is not material; he is spiritual,” Eddy concludes emphatically. sacred-texts.com. Because of these teachings, *Science and Health* functionally **supersedes the Bible** for Christian Scientists – Eddy asserted that the Bible can only be correctly understood through the “Key” of her textbook. en.wikipedia.org. Over the years, she revised the book many times, with the final, standardized edition published in 1907. It remains *the authoritative scripture* of Christian Science, often simply called “the textbook.”
- Manual of The Mother Church* (first issued 1895):** As the Christian Science movement grew, Eddy produced this Manual to organize and govern the church. The *Manual of The Mother Church* is essentially the **church bylaws and constitution** for the **Church of Christ, Scientist** (also known as The Mother Church in Boston and its branches

worldwide). It contains rules on church structure, administration, and discipline. For example, it sets guidelines for Christian Science practitioners (healers) and teachers, lays out the order of services (which notably have **no ordained clergy and no sermons**, only readings from the Bible and *Science and Health*), and establishes institutions like the Christian Science **Reading Rooms**. The Manual also includes such things as the “Tenets of Christian Science” and directives for moral behavior of members. In practice, the *Manual* became an instrument of Eddy’s tight control. She made it clear that no rule in it could be changed without her approval, and even after her death the Manual’s provisions are to be followed to the letter. It centralized authority in a self-perpetuating Board of Directors in Boston. In short, the *Manual* is **authoritative** for every aspect of church life – from how services are conducted, to how members are admitted or disciplined, to how the organization handles publishing and charities. One scholar noted that Eddy’s church was **highly authoritarian**, and the *Manual* ensured **absolute control**: it was “the basic foundation for governing the church,” and no deviation from its rules was permitted. preciousseed.org. Even today, Christian Science churches worldwide operate under the structure set forth in Eddy’s Manual.

2. Influences

Christian Science did not emerge in a vacuum. Mary Baker Eddy’s ideas were shaped by several **19th-century intellectual and religious currents**. Understanding these influences helps explain why Christian Science diverges so dramatically from orthodox Christianity. Three major influences were:

- **Transcendentalism:** Eddy was influenced by the New England Transcendentalist movement (think of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others). Transcendentalism taught that God is an impersonal *Over-Soul* present in all of nature, and that spiritual truth is found by intuition and *inner* enlightenment rather than by external revelation. It also held an optimistic view of human nature as inherently divine. These ideas **paralleled Eddy’s views** in keyways. Eddy too insisted on an impersonal concept of God (as *Principle/Mind*). She likewise believed true knowledge of God comes from spiritual insight or “illumination” rather than from literal Scripture or church doctrine. Most of all, Christian Science echoes the Transcendentalist notion that **man is fundamentally spiritual and good**. Eddy wrote, “*Man is spiritual and perfect... he is the image of God.*” sacred-texts.com In her theology, as in Emerson’s philosophy, the human soul has a divine essence (Eddy taught that man is God’s *reflection*, without real sin). Indeed, historians note that Christian Science **wove together liberal Protestant ideas with metaphysical ones** in a way very akin to Transcendentalism. ora.ox.ac.uk/en.wikipedia.org. The influence is direct: Eddy grew up in New England during the Transcendentalist heyday and was exposed to its literature. Christian Science’s emphasis on *mind, spirit, and moral idealism* over ritual or creed shows this DNA. However, by adopting Transcendentalism’s *impersonal* God and innate human divinity, Eddy’s system moved far from biblical personal theism.
- **New Thought and “Mind-Cure” Metaphysics:** Christian Science was part of a broader atmosphere of 19th-century **metaphysical healing movements**. The most prominent was “New Thought,” which, like Christian Science, taught that **the mind has power over**

matter and that positive spiritual thinking can heal disease. In fact, New Thought and Christian Science share a common origin in **Phineas Quimby** (as mentioned earlier). Quimby's ideas – that disease is caused by wrong belief and cured by *right thinking* – directly fed into Eddy's doctrine. By the 1880s and 1890s, a whole "mind-cure" movement was spreading, with groups teaching variants of mental healing. Eddy's Christian Science distinguished itself by tying the practice to Christian terminology, but in essence it *embraced the same metaphysical idealism*. She taught that what we call physical illness is actually a **mental error** – "false belief" – and that **correct understanding of divine Mind is the cure**. One historian writes that at that time, **medical practice was often primitive or harmful**, so people were open to alternatives; *"patients regularly fared better without [traditional medicine]. This provided fertile soil for the mind-cure groups, who argued that sickness was an absence of 'right thinking' or failure to connect to Divine Mind."*en.wikipedia.org Eddy took these popular ideas and **merged** them with Christian concepts of prayer and Christ. The result was Christian Science, but many of its notions (the unreality of sickness, the creative power of thought, the divine nature of mind) are basically **New Thought metaphysics in Christian dress**. In short, Christian Science draws heavily on the "**positive thinking**" tradition that later evolved into various self-help spiritualities.

- **19th-Century Idealism:** Philosophically, Christian Science is rooted in **Idealism** – the belief (held by philosophers like Berkeley and Hegel) that reality is fundamentally mental or spiritual, not material. In the 1800s, there was considerable interest in mystical and idealist philosophies. Eddy was influenced by this climate. She outright declared **matter to be unreal**. This is a classic idealist stance: that **all is mind**. In *Science and Health* she wrote the "*Scientific Statement of Being*," which says in part: "**All is infinite Mind... Spirit is real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal.**" sacred-texts.com Such statements closely **echo the idealist philosophy** that physical things have no true substance. Eddy's specific brand of idealism also absorbed concepts from Eastern religions and Western occult thought circulating in her day (for example, both Hindu Vedanta and Western esotericism teach that the material world is *maya* or illusion – a striking parallel to Eddy's teachings. en.wikipedia.org). By positioning Christian Science as a "*Science*," Eddy was aligning with the era's fascination with laws of nature – except she claimed to reveal the **spiritual laws** behind nature. She argued that Christian Science was **scientific truth** and that traditional Christianity was mired in material "superstition." In reality, this means she replaced historic Christian **revelation** with a **Gnostic-like secret knowledge**: only those *initiated* into her metaphysical "Science" understand the *real* (spiritual) meaning of the Bible and the universe. This heavy influence of Idealist philosophy is a key reason **Christian Science is not** historic Christianity. Its cosmology (what is real vs. unreal) and epistemology (how we know truth) come from Idealism, not from the Hebrew-Christian worldview of an actual Creator and creation.

Given these influences, it becomes clear that **Christian Science is a syncretistic religion** – blending biblical language with ideas from Transcendentalism, New Thought, and philosophical Idealism. It *borrow*s terms like "Christ," "Spirit," and "salvation," but utterly **redefines** them in line with metaphysical philosophy. en.wikipedia.org. This is why Christian Science *cannot* be considered a branch of orthodox Christianity. It **abandons core biblical doctrines** in favor of speculative spiritual theories. In many ways it resembles ancient **Gnosticism** – a heresy that also

claimed secret spiritual knowledge and taught that matter is an illusion. In summary, Christian Science is essentially a **metaphysical philosophy dressed up as Christianity**. It is “*Christian*” only in vocabulary, not in substance or historical continuity.

3. Growth of the Movement

Despite its unorthodox doctrines, Christian Science gained a significant following in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Several factors contributed to its rapid growth:

- **Emphasis on Healing Without Medicine:** One of the biggest draws of Christian Science was its promise of **health and healing** through spiritual means alone. In an era when conventional medicine was often ineffective and sometimes downright dangerous, this was highly attractive. In the mid-1800s, medical science was rudimentary – there were no antibiotics, and treatments like bloodletting and mercury drugs sometimes did more harm than good. Many people “*regularly fared better without*” a doctor’s interventions en.wikipedia.org. Christian Science stepped into this context offering what seemed like a **higher, safer cure**. Eddy taught that disease is not a physical reality at all, and thus “**the divine Mind alone**” can heal it – not drugs or surgery en.wikipedia.org en.wikisource.org. Countless testimonies began to circulate of individuals who recovered from illnesses after Christian Science prayer when doctors had given up on them. This created a powerful mystique around the movement. To suffering people desperate for relief, the idea of a prayer-based “*Science of healing*” was compelling. Eddy wrote in *Science and Health* that reliance on materia medica (medicine) actually **obscures** the real cure, which is spiritual understanding en.wikisource.org. Her followers took this to heart. The movement actively encouraged members to **refuse most medical treatment**, and many early converts were those who felt they had been healed by Christian Science after medical failure. In short, Christian Science grew because it offered hope of healing in a time when standard medicine often had little to offer. Divine healing has always attracted interest – and Eddy presented her method not as faith healing based on a miracle, but as a **repeatable system** that anyone could learn. This **apparent “scientific” approach to healing** gave it credibility and wide appeal.
- **Appeal to Educated, Middle-Class Audiences:** Unlike many new religious movements of its day, Christian Science cultivated an **image of sophistication**. It gained traction especially among the middle and upper classes in urban areas. Observers noted that “*Christian Science was apparently more intellectual, more civil, and altogether more sophisticated in style*” than the fire-and-brimstone revivalism or emotive sects common in 19th-century America. ora.ox.ac.uk. It was *born* in the cultured circles of New England and spread among people of education and means. In both the U.S. and Britain, Christian Science “*recruited a clientele that was disproportionately drawn from the middle and upper classes.*” ora.ox.ac.uk Many professionals, academics, and social elites were intrigued by Eddy’s system, finding it more pleasant than traditional evangelical religion. It “*confirmed them in their prosperity*” by teaching that health and goodness are natural, God-given states. ora.ox.ac.uk. Moreover, Christian Science presented itself as a **bridge between science and religion**, which attracted the “would-be intellectual” segment of the public. ora.ox.ac.uk. At a time when scientific advances were causing some to doubt old-

time religion, Eddy's movement said *Christianity itself is Science*. This helped alleviate the conflict some educated people felt between modern science and faith. Additionally, Christian Science's **optimistic tone** – it lacked preaching on hell, sin, or damnation – appealed to those uncomfortable with the harsher doctrines of Christianity. In essence, the religion's cultured mystique and philosophical approach helped it gain respectability. It wasn't viewed (at first) as a fringe cult but rather was discussed in high society circles and even had a few prominent converts.

- **Reading Rooms and Publishing Efforts:** Christian Science also grew through savvy **institutional efforts**, especially its publishing and publicity. Eddy was a prolific writer and organizer. She founded the **Christian Science Publishing Society** in 1883 and began releasing journals that greatly spread her teachings. *The Christian Science Journal* (est. 1883) and later the *Christian Science Sentinel* (1898) became major vehicles for outreach. They regularly **published anecdotal healing testimonials** – thousands upon thousands of first-hand accounts from people claiming to have been cured by Christian Science. wikipedia.org. (Between 1900 and 1989, nearly 54,000 such testimonies were published. en.wikipedia.org!) These stories – vetted by the church for accuracy – were compelling propaganda, persuading readers that Christian Science “works.” The movement also set up **public Reading Rooms** in cities and towns, which were essentially storefront libraries/bookstores where anyone could come in and read Christian Science literature or ask questions. By placing reading rooms in prominent downtown locations, often marked simply as “Christian Science Reading Room,” the church gave itself a **respectable and inviting public face**. learn.ligonier.org. The Reading Rooms, along with lecture circuits and Christian Science practitioners advertising their services, created constant grassroots exposure. Furthermore, Eddy's establishment of a well-respected newspaper – *The Christian Science Monitor* (founded 1908) – enhanced the religion's public image. The *Monitor* was a serious, prize-winning newspaper (largely secular in content) which lent credibility to the church. In summary, **effective use of print media and public engagement** helped Christian Science spread far and wide. By 1910 (the year Eddy died), there were **over 1,000 Christian Science churches** and societies around the world, and the movement claimed hundreds of thousands of adherents. The combination of **personal testimonies**, easy access to literature, and a presence in communities via Reading Rooms allowed Christian Science to grow into an international religious movement by the early 20th century.

Sources for Part 1 and 2:

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