

Happiness Factor in Changes for Local Christian Science Churches

A Project in Theological Reflexivity by Shirley Paulson,
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From a perspective of theological reflexivity, I should explain my own place in this research. I am a member of a local Christian Science church, and I have close friends whom I enjoy very much in my church. But my church has experienced very little change in our way of doing things over a period of many decades. Although we have had discussions about how we might go about change, it has not happened. I learned from other Christian Scientists about changes in their churches, and I was surprised to hear how happy they are *because* of their changes.

Theological basis for change

Unchanging God
Prayer changes the pray-er

Since we share the same theology, I wanted to investigate their application of theology, to see how it functioned in their actions.

The three Christian Science churches I studied are in the US – from the East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast

The theological question in Christian Science regarding change is as follows: since God is understood to be *unchangeable*, how does God *effect* change in human experience? Let me explain that just a bit, in order to discuss its impact on the changing churches.

God's immutability in Christian Science is biblically based, as in Malachi 3:6 -- "For I the LORD do not change." In the first chapter of Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health* – the chapter entitled 'Prayer' – she raises the question as to who or what changes in the experience of prayer. Consistent with the God who does not change, Eddy challenges her readers with some rhetorical questions about the assumptions people make in their prayers.

Do we pray to *enlighten* the infinite? Can we ask God to be *more* than Love? Do we expect to *change perfection*?

Six questions

1. Why did they change?
2. What was the process that enabled the change?
3. What was the Biblical foundation for their work?
4. What was the distinctly Christian Science theological basis for their actions?
5. How did their understanding of their mission play out in the change?
6. How does their change affect their view of the future?

I'm going to share my findings from these three churches, as to how their application of this theology related to their experiences. I asked three or four people from each church to tell me what the changes meant to them and if they were conscious of any theological basis for the changes. From these responses, I found useful answers to six basic questions:

Why did they change?

What was the process that enabled the change?

What was the Biblical foundation for their work?

What was the distinctly Christian Science theological basis for their actions?

How did their understanding of their mission play out in the change?

How does their change affect their view of the future?

- **Third Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston**
www.christianscienceboston.org
FB – Christian Science: Third Church of Christ Scientist, Boston
- **First Church of Christ, Scientist, Newport Beach, CA**
www.cschurchsc.org
- **First Church of Christ, Scientist, Brentwood, MO**
www.nextgensfellowship.com
FB – Next Generation Fellowship: Religious Organizations

The three churches are:

Third Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston
First Church of Christ, Scientist, Newport Beach, CA
First Church of Christ, Scientist, Brentwood, Missouri

I'm going to summarize my findings for each of the questions, and then highlight a few specific examples.

1. Why did they change?

- Two said = forced out
- One formed because = many seeking a better way to do church
- All of them said = consciously dealing with stagnation

Why did they change?

Two of the churches left their beloved church buildings because they were forced out of them.

The third church was formed because a critical mass of Christian Scientists from neighboring churches was already actively seeking a better way to do church.

All of them said they were consciously dealing with stagnation.

Why did they change?



In Boston, their moment of reckoning came when they had to decide either to commit significant resources to building repair or to something else. Almost all the church members lived in different neighborhoods, so they had become disconnected from the neighborhood. They agreed it was time to move on.

Why did they change?



In Los Angeles, the move was initiated by a real estate sale and development by their neighbor that took away their parking lot. They attempted mergers with two other smaller Christian Science churches nearby, but they preferred to stay where they were. These members didn't know where to go until they were forced out.

Why did they change?



In St. Louis, the formation of a new church came primarily from those who left more traditional Christian Science churches. The idea for a new church began when a number of people from one congregation began meeting and tried to intentionally think of doing church 'outside the box.' One of them said he was motivated due to his fear of the impending collapse of Christian Science without trying dramatic change. The few remaining members of THIS nearly abandoned Christian Science church invited the new group to move in and renovate it for their new purpose and mission.

2. What was the process that enabled the change?

- All held 'mission' or 'Spiritual Cultivation' meetings a couple of years before the change
- Prayer was a serious and central aspect of the change
- Prayer resulted in self-examination and improvement

#2. What was the process that enabled the change?

All three churches held 'mission' or 'Spiritual Cultivation' meetings to pray and to proactively deliberate about the process together. Praying in Christian Science, as I mentioned, means acknowledging the presence of the good idea they're looking for – that is, God's plan – and then being willing to live in accord with it. So prayer was a very serious matter in the process of change.

All three expressed considerable patience – which indicated their trust that the idea would come, and they would yield to it. As a result of the prayer, they became aware of their shortcomings, and they focused on changing themselves before expecting God to reveal exactly what steps to take. Not everybody was happy when the moves became evident, as they all lost a few. But the gains appear to outweigh the losses for all three.

What was the process that enabled the change?



For the members of Boston, one of the motives that surfaced from the meetings was to slough off entrenched thinking and cultural practices that had little to do with the theology and practice of Christian Science. After two years of study and clarification of the mission, they wrote their first mission statement and went ahead with the move. They are still meeting in community centers, which they do not like, but they're happy with the decision to move, because they have been freed up to focus on their larger mission.

- What was the process that enabled the change?



In Los Angeles, the church members realized from their ‘Spiritual Cultivation’ meetings they had not addressed their underlying purpose, which also exposed the fact that, despite their outward friendliness, they had become disjointed. After they took the time to settle on their mission together, a couple of innovative ideas came, and they were able to move to the Boy Scout Sea Base on a lease basis.

What was the process that enabled the change?



In St. Louis, some individuals wanted to start a Bible study in their church and began a program called 'Sunday night live' - which also always included contemporary music. After a couple of years, they decided to form their own church to include both the contemporary ministry as well as the more traditional one. But even the traditional part includes new features. And just as important as their services and ministry, they have sought active connections with the local and global community.

3. What was the Biblical foundation for their work?

- Two churches= no specific group work
- One church = sought biblical guidance communally
- All churches = individuals made Bible central to prayer
- All churches = Old and New Testaments
- Most frequent reference = follow Jesus' command to love others

#3. What was the Biblical foundation for their work?

The members of the two churches whose changes were forced on them did not report any specific group work with Bible, but the St. Louis members did seek biblical guidance communally. In all churches, most individuals made the Bible a central part of their individual prayers.

All responses referenced specific Old Testament and New Testament scriptures, and the most important theme that came through all of their reports was the desire to follow Jesus's teaching of loving the brethren – or fellow church members - and all 'neighbors' – or, community.

What was the Biblical foundation for their work?



In Boston, they thought through the application of and commitment to the Biblical instruction to love one another and to love God. The Church had to be close to Christ in spirit as well as in name. Also the biblical guidance they shared with me included Abraham's trust, and being of one accord as at the day of Pentecost.

What was the Biblical foundation for their work?



In LA, the biblical focus was on Jesus' instruction to wait patiently in Jerusalem until the descent of the Holy Spirit. They took that to mean they should wait until they were assured of their guidance from the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament also offered guidance especially from Proverbs, and the Gospels encouraged them to trust God and be assured that the church was built on the rock.

What was the Biblical foundation for their work?



In St. Louis, the Bible played a major role in the establishment of this church, both individually and collectively. They began with biblical study, and their new ministry, called 'Gatherings' were organized strictly on the Bible, so their commitment to each other is a Biblical covenant. Especially inspiring sources of encouragement for making their changes were the stories of Nehemiah's rebuilding and Peter's boldness at the Pentecost. And now they consciously rely on the Bible for their mission – such as in support of this bi-racial wedding.

4. What was the Christian Science theological basis for actions?

- Writings of Mary Baker Eddy for Scriptural insights
- Prayer to conform to spiritual ideas
- Two churches = use of definitions
- One church = Church Manual

#4. What was the Christian Science theological basis for actions?

All of them looked to the writings of Mary Baker Eddy for Scriptural insights. These became central to their prayers, as they strove to conform to these spiritual ideas. For example, Boston and LA members made use of *definitions* of terms, such as 'church' and 'man' to conceptualize their aspirations. The members in St. Louis turned to Eddy's Church Manual as a spiritual guide for church making. But they were looking for the flexibility that allowed them to hold to the core meaning while adjusting for cultural changes.

What was
the Christian
Science
theological
basis for
actions?

“We love our new front door!”



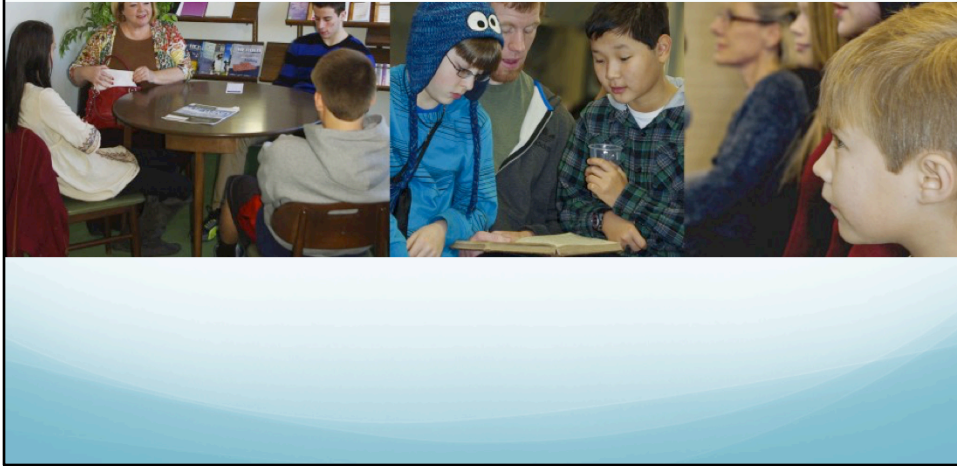
In Boson, the treasurer of the church found help from Eddy's definition of 'Church,' that says, in part, that "The church is that institution which *affords* proof of its utility." She interpreted that as confirmation that if the church is not addressing real needs in the community, it wasn't really 'affordable' to be used in that way. It was helping them seek authenticity and genuine God-centered relations in the community.

What was the CS theological basis for actions?



In LA, they found comfort and guidance in a prayer/poem of Eddy's that is usually sung in hymns. The first line reads "Shepherd, show me how to go...all the rugged way." As is common in Christian Science prayer, they expected that their right attitude and fidelity to spiritual ideas would be both practical and ideal. That is, the constant source of good – God – would guide them as to how they should move, or change.

What was the CS theological basis for actions?



In St. Louis, they paid special attention to what they were teaching about Jesus – specifically, from Eddy’s words, that “we *adore* Jesus and the heart overflows with gratitude.” There had been too much of a focus on Eddy herself, whereas *she* taught her students to follow Jesus instead. The change in emphasis did bring up some tension, causing some members to leave, as they sorted out the difference between Eddy’s original Christological teaching and subsequent cultural practices. But as usual with pruning, they dropped some but gained more.

5. How did their mission play out in the change?

- Prayers turned focus on mission
- Care more for each other
- Seeking active support for community
- Support healing practice and extra support for those in need

#5. How did their mission play out in the change?

This topic elicited the most response. I conclude that in all three cases, their prayers for where to go and how to do church turned into a focus on their mission. They all said they want to express their love for God, for each other, and the community more actively. They also discovered in different ways they had not been invested in the community and wanted to find new, creative and authentic ways to do so. Another common theme is that as part of their mission, they want to encourage each other with more strength and commitment to prayer-based healing. Two of them specifically mentioned their desire to express more care and support for those turning to medical help when their needs were overwhelming. This was a significant internal conversation, because traditionally, Christian Scientists seek healing through prayer alone. Although there aren't any church rules about it, it can be tempting to feel defeated or even judged if some kind of medical help is sought.

How did their mission play out in the change?



The Boston church was one of those. A key to the cohesion they felt during the upheaval of change was their pro-active loving attitude, especially in the case of someone seeking medical help. Since the theological premise in Christian Science is that spiritual growth results in physical healing, the temptation for Christian Scientists to privately judge one another's spiritual growth by their success in healing needs to be guarded against. These members acknowledged Mrs. Eddy's own pragmatic and compassionate accommodation explained in *Science and Health* for those seeking medical support. While Eddy never asked for any medical treatment for herself when she suffered from kidney stones, she did use morphine a few times for the relief of extreme pain. So this church made a conscious decision to be loving and supportive *especially* when someone in the community is having difficulty of any sort.

They shared this example: One of our church members recently went to the hospital in an emergency and had the care he needed. He continued to pray while he received medical help, until he experienced a full healing. His doctors agreed that there was no further need for medication, although they thought it was highly unusual in such a situation. Our church member believes his prayer brought him through and beyond what the doctors were able to do for him, and he attributes his church's love and support for him to the success of his prayers. He claims we kept him from losing his faith, and he has resumed his normal prayer and practice.

How did their mission play out in the change?



The members of the Los Angeles church felt they would not have found their purpose without having the patience to pray first and consciously to establish their mission on a spiritual foundation. They discovered their purpose had become vague; and as a community, they had not even realized how they become disjointed.

They want to deal directly with what they see as a Christian Science movement-wide dichotomy, defined on the one side as 'alive, innovative, creative, and functional' versus 'those who resist this mightily.'

My editorial comment here is that, while they didn't say this, it seems to me their willingness to work on their mission made them confront within themselves that same 'mighty resistance' they must have felt within *themselves* before they had to move.

How did
their
mission
play out
in the
change?



The St. Louis church members were intentional in how they wanted to address all the practices from the old culture that inhibited their mission. They questioned every detail of the old culture and asked why they do what they do. Just a few of the conclusions that led to their changes include:

- ^ that the role of physical healing is still central and important, but not the *only* mission
- ^ that they want to be conscious of the diverse ways in which divine Love meets human needs – and to be open to them – rather than superior to ‘other’ systems.
- ^ that they see their denominational church as part of the long sweep of Christian history, as part of Christ’s church; they identify more as a Christian Science Christian church than a part of a religion that’s just different from orthodox Christianity.

They sent me long lists of changes that have resulted from their mission re-think. I’ll share just a few of these:

- ^ Experience with interfaith circles is giving them examples of how to tolerate, love, understand and unite with those of other cultures, religions and races.
- ^ Actively respecting others has inspired some to go to seminary, where traditionally very few do so.
- ^ Most of them would like to be more inclusive of LGBTs, but not all. Both sides are patient with the other.

6. How do they view future?

- All optimistic and grateful for changes
- All agree = concern to maintain freshness and unity
- One church seeking change = much more to say

#6. How do they view the future?

All of them are optimistic about the future and mentioned in some way that they need to stay on their guard to maintain their original freshness and unity.

The St. Louis church, the one that proactively sought changes, has been giving the future much attention.

How do they view future?



For them, the future looks both bright and challenging.

This is a women's group, one of a number of special interest groups in the St. Louis church, that is relatively unusual among Christian Science churches. They're happy with where they are as well as their hopes for the future

Others from the church mentioned that, even though some would like to progress more rapidly, they are conscious that the steady pace of change is safer and more secure. They understand that without any precedent for their new form of church polity, they could face difficulties, particularly in the area of leadership.

But they are clearly happy they have found a way to move out of outgrown cultures. Some said too much is at stake not to try.

How do they view future?



The members of Los Angeles say they expect a bright future that is filled with healing – of themselves, of needs in their community, of opportunities to share Christian Science with others as they're led. In reference to Jesus' admonition to his students in Luke 24:49, they want to move at Spirit's bidding as they are "equipped with power from on high."

Conclusion



This photo is the message from Boston about their future.

Back to my reflexive theological position for a conclusion. There is not doubt that all these churches are very glad they have made the changes and feel they are in a better place than before. It appears to me that the source of happiness for these churches that made such big changes was their willingness to comply with the theological basis in Christian Science for a relationship with God.

I did not notice any conscious effort to apply any specific theological premise to their projects, but I do see that they all approached their problems with prayer based on the theology of an unchanging God who supplies their ever-changing needs. The result of their prayer included a recognition of their needs for a change of heart and a change in their commitment to mission. There was a clear recognition that they are the ones who needed to change and to do it in compliance with whatever came to them in prayer.

I am interested in the fact that all three churches found a need to pray for a couple of years before taking action. They also emphasize their commitment to service in the community, whereas none of them had been especially attentive to this calling before their changes. They did not collaborate or seek advice from other churches, but it was the same answer to their prayers. From a Christian Science perspective, it