**Michael Servetus and Mary Baker Eddy:**

**From the power of self-service to the power of serving others**

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**By Shirley Paulson**

Christ Jesus has been loved, adored, and worshiped throughout the millennia, but he was also a religious dissenter. His example of religious dissent helps us identify the purpose and means by which dissent can be a benefit to humanity. The goal of this paper is to analyze two examples of followers of Jesus who also became dissenters. Like Jesus, their work exposed weaknesses and proposed reform for the ecclesial authorities of their day. They illustrate how successful dissidence can promote not only religious tolerance, but also transform religious practices motivated by greed and power into communities of love. Michael Servetus, whose 500th birthday we celebrate this year, fought what he diagnosed as the source of corruption in the church. Three hundred years later, Mary Baker Eddy took issue with the church’s disconnect from the Christian practice of healing. They both opposed prevalent religious practices that squelched the spirit of love.

*Jesus’ source of authority – not of this world*

Jesus forgave enemies, he loved and prayed for people in trouble, and he healed sufferers. But he also cast money-changers out of the temple. He criticized the Jewish party of Pharisees for practicing their religion too rigidly and threatened the authority of synagogue rulers. For his dissent, he was crucified. During his trial, Jesus explained simply the purpose and authority of his mission to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. He claimed no human kingship, but he lived with authority. He told Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” [[1]](#footnote-1) He was born into the world, he explained, to bear witness to the truth, but not for the purpose of being a king of this world. There were two rules that would identify his followers: loving God supremely, and loving others.

Jesus had warned his followers against temptation with human powers. He understood it himself, as he struggled in the wilderness against the devil’s promise to be the greatest on earth. **[[2]](#footnote-2)** Later he rebuked his disciples for asking who would be greatest. Undoubtedly there have been humble, unselfish followers who continued to live according to his laws of love. But the establishment of the church tempted its leaders to amass powers and fame in the likeness of human power structures. By the Middle Ages, the Christian Church had largely become synonymous with the State, enjoying powers reserved for kings and emperors. Unfortunately, its powers of oppression intensified while it maintained for itself the only access to God and salvation.

In many ways, the church had accomplished great good for society. Rebuilding after the collapse of the Roman Empire was principally the task of the church. Education,

commerce, and art began to flourish due to the work of the church. But self-empowerment, greed, and pride within the church thrived too. Ultimately the church took on draconian measures to strengthen its hold on power mushrooming out of control – papal taxes, indulgences, excommunication, and so on. The greater its power, the harsher its treatment of those it was supposed to love and serve. Protestant reformers finally broke through some of the most severe forms of oppression, but as will be seen through the work of Michael Servetus, even they were not able to resist the temptation with power.

*Michael Servetus: challenging fundamental dogma*

By the time Servetus was a teenager, the Church’s commitment to the love of God and love of neighbors had nearly been swallowed up by the love of money and fame. Turning from his youthful Catholic exuberance, Servetus studied the writings of these Reformers and became an opponent of the papacy. Witnessing the opulent coronation of Charles V and the corruption in Rome, he grew disgusted with popes, cardinals, and bishops living in splendor, dressing in expensive silks and jewels, eating rare delicacies – and then using their power to create indulgences for the poor to pay off debts to God.

Protestants also missed the opportunity for real reform, he thought, by not pursuing the cause of the corruption to its core. They would never loosen their grip on money, fame, and power as long as they clung to the doctrines and dogma established in the fourth century. It was the Trinitarian formula itself, he claimed, that caused the fundamental problem. By becoming God,[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus was stripped of his role as mediator, and ordinary people could access the divine *only* through the church. The church therefore put itself in the position of becoming a necessity, as mediator between God and people – and as such, it took on extra-earthly powers, such as the creating of heretics, excommunicating, and crusading.

Servetus was convinced the acts of abuse were not necessary, and that the original Biblical teaching about Christ Jesus would eliminate them. Based on his own knowledge of Greek, he argued the formula for the Trinity is simply not found in the Bible.

The questionable verse – 1 John 5:7 – was a corruption of the original, which merely stated, “there are three that testify.” The crucial words added sometime after the Nicene Council are: “There are three that give testimony in Heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Servetus was so appalled with his discovery of the arrogance of the Church’s apparent manipulation of the Scriptural texts for defense of its power, he gave up his law studies in order to devote his life to the restoration of Christianity to its original pre-Nicean beliefs. He found that post-Nicene theology based on an incomprehensible technical language of scholars completely missed the essence of New Testament Christianity.[[5]](#footnote-5) It was post-Nicean philosophers and theologians who originated such terms as *Trinity, hypostases, homoouisia, person, substance, and essence*, and it was no surprise to Servetus that they were not terms included in the New Testament. His own Christology, then, was based on concepts he found directly in the Bible, and he treated the Trinity as the expression of God’s three aspects expressed in human history. But they were not three differentiated, separate persons.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The effect of belief in the Post-Nicene Trinity, Servetus claimed, was to separate the spirit of Christ from ordinary human consciousness, consequently removing the basis for moral responsibility. He wrote, “God gave us the mind so that we know Him.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It is precisely the empowerment of the individual with moral and mental might that most seriously threatens centralized power.[[8]](#footnote-8) As long as Protestants continued to hold to this faulty theology, he thought, they would fall prey to the same temptations that perverted the Catholic Church.

Servetus’ logic and vast knowledge did not prepare him for his greatest challenge: neither Catholics nor Protestants had alternative methods for sustaining the church without the historical structure of power. If he were to convince church leaders that their Trinitarian theology was misleading, or that their premises for power were false, the church as it was known, would not survive.

His naïve hope in religious tolerance misguided him. Although he did try to live incognito for a while, avoiding persecution from both the Spanish Inquisition and Trinitarian Protestants, he was not careful enough. Narrowly escaping one scheduled execution by the Catholics, he fled, foolishly, to Geneva, right into the jaws of the Protestant headquarters of John Calvin. Calvin, in particular, had been trying to silence Servetus, until he finally cornered him in Geneva, and supported his death sentence without a fair trial. The young 42 year-old Servetus was burned at the stake, serving notice to rest of Christendom that doctrines held the power to destroy dissidents.

Though Catholics and Protestants alike were relieved to silence Servetus, a few people took note that this persecution was not the way of a Christian. It could not be an act representative of Jesus’ kingdom of love. French theologian, Sebastian Castellio famously responded to Calvin, “To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, but simply to kill a man.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This was a blatant demonstration of the very point Servetus had been teaching – that when the church becomes the institution of power, individuals lose their moral integrity. 350 years later, in 1903, the friends of Calvin erected a monument to Servetus, acknowledging Calvin’s great mistake.

*Comparative themes with Mary Baker Eddy*

On this 500th birthday of Michael Servetus, I, as a Christian Scientist, have noticed some parallel themes in the work of the founder of the Christian Science Church, Mary Baker Eddy. Christian Science is not a successor to Servetus, as Unitarians and Oneness Pentecostals claim to be. But, like Servetus, Eddy’s protest was against the creeds and ecclesial practices that drained the Church of Christian spirit.

By the time Mary Baker Eddy was born in 1821, America had become a breeding ground for dissent. Political dissent was an honorable tradition in America, and religious dissent was even legally permissible. But religious dissent still roused profound suspicion and fear among those who held earthly powers in the church.

Eddy grew up in a deeply religious Puritan home in New England. She loved Jesus, the Bible, and the family church. But her father’s “relentless theology,” as she put it, emphasizing the doctrine of predestination, terrified young Mary. She was unwilling to be saved herself, she claimed, if her older brothers and sisters were to be doomed to perpetual banishment from God.[[10]](#footnote-10) At an early age, she began to distinguish between what she called “cruel creeds” and the Christianity built on the foundation of love. When the threat of predestination became too personal and intense for her, she became feverishly ill. Her father’s response was to remind her of the danger of endless punishment, as he hoped to win her back from the dreaded heresy. Her mother’s response was to bathe her burning temples and encourage her to lean on God’s love. She chose her mother’s remedy, and soon a deep joy came over her. The fever left, and she proclaimed the “horrible decree of predestination” forever lost its power over her.[[11]](#footnote-11) She noted it was John Calvin himself who rightly identified it as a horrible decree.

Eddy became a fearless dissenter, even though, as she said, she “never left the church, either in heart or in doctrine, but began where the church left off.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The distinction she experienced between Jesus’ kingdom of love and the kingdom built on man-made creeds defined her mission. The fundamental problem with creeds, as she saw it, was their inability to inspire love. Eager for the winds of reform to grab hold in the hearts of Christians, she wrote optimistically,

“…dogma and creed will pass off in scum, leaving a solid Christianity at the bottom – a foundation for the builders. I would that all the churches on earth could unite as brethren in one prayer. Father, teach us the life of Love.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The “scum” she refers to is worse than useless religion. Her objection to dogmas and creeds was their inability to lift thought above mortal sense. God should be “understood, adored, and demonstrated,”[[14]](#footnote-14) she claimed, instead of being an object of rehearsed human opinion.

As with most Christian dissenters, the heart of Eddy’s protest lay in the theological relationship with Jesus Christ. Servetus and Eddy both objected to Christological doctrines that resulted in humanity’s inability to follow Jesus as the divine Exemplar. They argued in favor of a human being’s freedom of conscience and moral capability to follow Christ. Eddy noted Jesus’ own predictions of human ability, as she wrote,

“The highest earthly representative of God, speaking of human ability to reflect divine power, prophetically said to his disciples, speaking not for their day only but for all time: ‘He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and ‘These signs shall follow them that believe.’”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The only way for humans to be able to do these works, she claimed, was through the saving power of Christ working in human consciousness. For Eddy, the distinction between Christ as the Word of God and the human Jesus as the divinely appointed Way-shower was necessary for humans to perceive the consciousness of Christ. Suffering, sinning mortals are unable to do the works that Jesus did, but the redeemed human thought gains access to the power of healing in his name. According to Jesus, human beings *should* be able to do the works that he did, with signs following. The problem with church creeds, according to Eddy, was their debilitating power against human capacity for Christian healing through spiritual means.

Eddy and Servetus – among a number of other theologians – had both argued that the belief in the depravity of human nature denied the individual’s capacity to think and do good. Servetus’ concern with the doctrine of justification, for example, was its means for simply handing over the keys for salvation to the church. Its rise in power increased proportionately to the decrease in humanity’s ability to do good works.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Eddy’s concern with the issues of depravity was with its proper identification. Not the children of God, or the image and likeness of God, but “mortals” – or what she termed “mortal minds” – truly *are* totally depraved.[[17]](#footnote-17) And without that acknowledgement, it is impossible for Christ to destroy the cause for suffering – or heal the sufferer. But the action of Christ is to annihilate that depravity for the purpose of revealing the image and likeness of God, the original purity of God’s children. The freedom from depravity enables humanity to fulfill Jesus’ prophecy – that anyone who believes on him should do as he did and that the signs of healing would follow. Eddy cited Paul, for example, who wrote, “Work out your *own* salvation!”[[18]](#footnote-18) and James who wrote, “show me your faith apart from your works, and by my works I will show you my faith.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Eddy discovered spiritual laws of healing available to anyone, which arose from her own cure of the effects of an accident. Realizing her healing came from divine Spirit, she searched the Bible to understand *how* it happened.[[20]](#footnote-20) Gradually it dawned on her that miracles – both for herself and those recorded in the Bible – were more accurately understood as the operation of divinely *natural* law. It was “deed, not creed, and practice more than theory,” she said, that elucidated for her spiritual abstractions in the Bible. Jesus’ practice and teachings were no longer impractical and impossible to ordinary humans, but they opened her thought to a higher sense of Christianity.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Eddy wrote that Christians who obeyed these laws of Jesus’ kingdom would realize their dependence on truth – the truth Jesus told Pilate he had come to bear witness to. Although Eddy referred to herself as a discoverer of this truth and the founder of a religious practice that follows Jesus, these truths were independent of herself, and the power was not “of this world.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

*Conclusion*

Both the churches that Servetus envisioned and that Eddy was able to establish were to confront prevailing doctrines and creeds, because they stifled genuine Christianity. They struggled with different symptoms and different diagnoses of the problems, but they both had to face the stubbornness of man-made power. When dissidents expose either corruption of power or cathedrals void of Spirit, their messages can be frightening to those in power. Castellio’s reaction to Servetus’ persecution continues to echo through the ages:

“Christ demanded of us that we don the white dress of a pure and holy life. But what instead occupies our thoughts? We do not dispute concerning the *way* to Christ, but on his relationship to God the Father, on the Trinity, predestination, …on a multitude of things which are not essential to salvation; things which, in truth, we can never know unless our hearts are pure, for these things must be apprehended spiritually.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Remembering Jesus’ words to Pilate can placate our fear of dissidents seeking practical spiritual understanding. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not from this world.” He was born into the world, he explained, to bear witness to the truth, and that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice.[[24]](#footnote-24) There is a significant consistency in all these dissident voices – Jesus, Michael Servetus, and Mary Baker Eddy - despite their separation in chronology and geography. Some concurring messages are: 1) that doctrinal form without the spirit of love ultimately separates humanity from the love of God; and 2) that the way to Christ requires spiritual apprehension above dogmatic righteousness.

Dissidents are not easy to hear however. In addition to their disruptive messages, their behavior can be jarring as well. Michael Servetus had a reputation for being proud, passionate, restless, and acting with a fiery spirit. Some thought Mary Baker Eddy could be fierce, impatient, and passionate. Jesus called one of his disciples “Satan,” and threw people out of the temple. It requires courage to withstand such rebuke, but whoever finds the spiritual maturity to denounce the real enemy will forward the mission of the church. Jesus told his followers, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Dissidents are also alone. When they oppose the powers and promises of the world, they endure persecution in its worst forms. Mary Baker Eddy expressed her life as a dissident this way: “Difficulty, abnegation, constant battle against the world, the flesh, and evil, tell my long-kept secret – evidence a heart wholly in protest and unutterable in love.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

We should remember that when churches leaders are truly willing to love God and love their neighbors, they will remain open to the voices of dissent. They will be alert to the temptation to take power from Christ and oppress those whom they want to bless. They will illustrate what Jesus meant when he said to Pilate that his kingdom was not from this world. His true followers will be known by their love for God and for all the world.

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1. John 18:36 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 4:8-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M. Hillar with Claire S. Allen, *Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant, Humanist, and Martyr,* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 185. Servetus’ opposition to the Trinity was the equating of Jesus with God. His deepest confession and final words were, “Oh Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have mercy on me.” According to his accusers, he had only to confess Jesus as “the eternal Son of God,” to be spared his ultimate death sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hillar 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Radovan Lovci, *Michael Servetus, Heretic Or Saint? The Life and Death of a Renaissance Man*,(USA: Prague House, 2008), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames: The Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World,* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 233*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Contra labellum Calvini,* no. 77, p. E 2 a., as quoted in Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550,* 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection,* (Boston, MA: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1891), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mary Baker Eddy, *Message to The First Church of Christ, Scientist or The Mother Church, Boston, June 15, 1902,* (Boston, MA: The First Church of Christ, Scientist,1902), 2.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mary Baker Eddy, *The First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany,* (Boston, MA: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1913), 301. The full quote reads: The present flux in religious faith may be found to be a healthy fermentation, by which the lees of religion will be lost, dogma and creed will pass off in scum, leaving a solid Christianity at the bottom – a foundation for the builders. I would that all the churches on earth could unite as brethren in one prayer. Father, teach us the life of Love. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,* (Boston, MA: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1875; reprint 1994), 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hillar, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings, 1883-1896,* (Boston, MA: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1896)*,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Philippians 2: 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James 2:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection,* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings,* 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Steven Gottschalk, Rolling Away Stone, *Rolling Away the Stone: Mary Baker Eddy’s Challenge to Materialism,* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Walter Nigg, *The Heretics: Heresy Through the Ages* (New York: Dorset Press, 1962),333.The full passage reads: “Christ demanded of us that we don the white dress of a pure and holy life. But what instead occupies our thoughts? We do not dispute concerning the *way* to Christ, but on his relationship to God the Father, on the Trinity, predestination, freedom of the will, the nature of God, the angels, the state of the soul after death – on a multitude of things which are not essential to salvation; things which, in truth, we can never know unless our hearts are pure, for these things must be apprehended spiritually.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. John 18:36-37 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Luke 7:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Eddy, *The First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)