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## Round table discussion What Christian Science Is and Isn't

An Interview with Elise L. Moore, Phil Davis and Jim Bencivenga

Religion is increasingly prominent in the public dialogue. When someone asks about Christian Science, how do you explain it? What are the common misconceptions? How do you respond to them? For answers, we turned to three longtime Christian Scientists. Phil Davis is a Christian Science practitioner and teacher, and currently works as Manager of Committees on Publication for the Church of Christ, Scientist, based in Boston. Elise Moore lives in Nashville, Tennessee, and is also a practitioner and teacher. Jim Bencivenga is a writer, editor, and amateur astronomer who recently retired after many years with The Christian Science Monitor.

**Phil Davis:** Sometimes you have to answer a large question during an elevator ride, and those two words--*Christian* and *Science*--are often where I start. *Christian* indicates our following of Christ Jesus--following in his footsteps, our devotion to him. We're students of the Gospels and the entire Bible, but the Gospels are so at the heart of the Bible that we look to them for the life and ministry of Christ Jesus. *Science* indicates that which can be proved, which is consistent, which points to law at work. When you merge those two words together, you have the life and ministry of Christ Jesus--of discipleship and following him and putting into practice on a consistent, everyday basis this law of God, of divine Love. God is always present, always Love, Truth, Life. He's never arbitrary, never distant. God's laws are always something to be proved, to put into practice.

**Elise Moore:** My elevator rides are shorter than yours, Phil. I say that Christian Science is the divine laws of God that Christ Jesus came to teach us, and to practice. It's the divine laws of God that are supreme over material laws, which anyone can learn and demonstrate.

**Jim Bencivenga:** I was not raised in Christian Science, and have two takes on it--there's the Christian love, and then there's the truth of Science. As I worked my

way through old theology to new theology--to Science--I saw that you can't separate the cross from Christianity, the vertical axis being the transcendent, the horizontal being the humanistic. But then of course Science never leaves you where you started. It never leaves you anywhere but with God. The whole dualism of religion--the notion that we're separated from God--evaporates with Christian Science. And, for me, it just meant I'm in the presence of God. That presence is real, spiritual. And it's healing. Christian Science says you're whole, you're one with God, you're divine, and that is very humbling. Christian Science is my means of understanding my unity with God, and it's a practical, loving, intelligent unity.

**Phil:** When you're talking with people about religion or spirituality, three basic concepts keep coming up: God, prayer, and "us" --who are we? So many people have a concept of God as being arbitrary, that He might not be available. Christian Science reveals the nature of God as being ever-present, perfect, always-available divine Love.

I remember a taxi cab driver who wanted me to explain Christian Science. I talked with her about prayer. I said, "There's a concept of God as up in heaven, and when you pray to Him, you try to get Him to adjust things down here on earth." She quickly agreed, "Yeah, that's my concept of prayer, of God:" I said, "*Or*, there's a concept of prayer in which God, being infinite intelligence, wisdom, and Love, is already doing everything for us. He's already there for us. But we're the ones who don't always do a good job of listening to Him. That's when we realize, 'I need to listen to my Father. I need to hear His voice, to feel His allness and greatness.'" There was a pause, and then she said, "I never thought of that before." Some people believe they don't really deserve God. They feel apart, separated. Christian Science changes that thought, brings us back to the Biblical sense that we are His dear children, that each of us is deserving of His love, and that His kingdom includes us.

**Elise:** One thing that helps us to understand God is spiritual sense, and that's what is most needed. The disciples asked Jesus, "Why do you teach the people using parables?" Jesus told them (it's in Matthew 13:15), "For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."

In that verse I see a key to what is necessary to understand Christian Science, and the Bible, actually--to understand Jesus' healings and what he was teaching. It's

the spiritual sense that gets beyond what the physical senses are saying to us, that leads us to understand with our heart. From this understanding then comes healing. It's not just an intellectual thing. Spiritual means "relating to God," so spiritual sense is feeling and discerning God and His creation--God's presence, grace, power, and goodness. Everyone can have this spiritual discernment, intuition, and feeling. It's something that we can cultivate and develop.

What kills spiritual sense is selfishness and sensuality. If a person really wants to grow spiritually, really wants to understand Christian Science, they need to have that sense of humility, honesty, and unselfishness, and be able to turn away from the physical senses. You can have a great desire to know about God, but if at the same time you're selfishly wanting to get what you want, and do what you want to do, it's just not going to work very well.

**Jim:** Building on that, Elise, I've always viewed Christian Science as God knowing me, God knowing His creation. What God knows is reality. It's certainly a principled way of knowing -- that's why it is available to everyone. God knows what's in my experience, and divine knowing is truly loving, empowering, spiritual. It gives dominion over any material condition, any relationship issue, whatever the challenge may be. Then, the peace that "passeth understanding" is there for us. A traditional Christian perspective is that Jesus is the Son of God, and is God. All kinds of confusions arise out of that view.

**Phil:** Jesus himself said that he wasn't God, but the Son of God. This is not about diminishing Jesus, or Christ. Jesus was the only man to deserve and hold that title of Christ, or Saviour, or Master.

**Jim:** Jesus demonstrated the Christ in a way that no one else has. Yet he didn't say, "OK, I've got it, but you guys will never get it." Rather, he said, "The Father loves me and the things I've done" --referring to his healing works-- "and you can do greater things." So Christ is God's power always with us. This came as a revelation to Mary Baker Eddy, and we can benefit from that insight. We can listen for the Christ, and we can heal as Jesus did.

**Elise:** I think the Christian Science confession of faith, if you will, is Matthew 16:16. Jesus asked his disciples who people thought that he was, and they gave various answers. Then he asked them, "Who do you think that I am?" Peter answered: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." We take this literally-- that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That relationship of Jesus to God, and of us to Jesus and to God, then, is explained in First Timothy 2, which

speaks of "God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (verses 3-5). To me, that puts everything into its proper relationship. There's one God, and Christ Jesus showed us how we are directly related to God--that we are endowed with divine identity.

**Phil:** Jesus also said, "The time will come when I will leave you, and I promise you a Comforter that will teach you all things and bring all things to remembrance." Mary Baker Eddy boldly states in her book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* that she understands this Comforter to be Divine Science, or Christian Science (see p. 55). There's a contrast between a promised Comforter and a comforting promise. The latter might be a philosophy, an approach to God, that allows you to get through this world, that gives you some hope, holds your hand as you live in this world. Now, I would never disparage that approach. To me, though, it's not enough. Because Christian Science is the promised Comforter, that Comforter is here right now, is bringing all things to remembrance, is here to teach us all things. It's about following the footsteps of Christ Jesus, who did not just get through the world but had an impact on the world. So we are to have an impact, not only on ourselves in living in this world, but on others around us -- literally, to help lift them up.

There are a lot of self-help groups available today. For some people, that is what helps them. What's really helped me have a sense of direction in my career, and physically with health problems, is a worship of God that moves me beyond the limitations and the criteria of this world so that, as Paul said, "I'm not conformed to it, but we can actually transform the world around us." Rather than the approach, "I'm happy with my lifestyle. Help me, God, to get through this world in my lifestyle," I want God to define my lifestyle. Christian Science is what does that. This God who is divine Mind, the source of all intelligence, direction, guidance, divine authority--when He takes charge and we pray as our Master prayed, "Father, Thy will be done, not mine" watch out, because amazing things happen.

**Jim:** I know; I once cut a tree down on myself and was banged up pretty good. I wasn't a Christian Scientist at that time and went through the medical route with all the things that go into that. Some months afterward, I was dealing with the side effects of medication, including severe breathing difficulties. My wife, who had come into Christian Science as a church soloist, said, "You ought to call so and so," someone who was the husband of one of my wife's high-school friends. I was desperate, and I was coming at it from the most elemental level--I wanted to breathe. I didn't want this pain. I wanted to be healed. So I called him. He was in

another city on the other side of the country, and was in the public practice of Christian Science. I didn't know what the heck that meant then. He simply said, "We're not getting off the phone till you're free." I had an instantaneous healing then and there, complete dominion over my breathing.

**Phil:** I was overseas a few years ago, conducting several workshops for fellow Christian Scientists. I had put a lot of prayer into it. At the last meeting scheduled, I had just given my introduction when someone nudged me. One of the participants had slumped in his chair. A colleague with me went to his side. She had been for many years a professional Christian Science nurse. (She told me later that, with all her nursing experience, she knew that he had passed on.) My first thought was, "Not on my watch!" All the prayer that had gone into these workshops, into this whole trip--the affirming of one perfect God governing us all, protecting, defending us in our relationship to the Almighty--was intact and effective, and I was not going to accept this picture. I wasn't the only one praying. Within a couple of minutes, he revived and was taken away to another location, walking on his own. He came back to the meeting about an hour later, completely restored. Christian Science teaches us to go right back to the Gospels, right back to Jesus' teaching, and not to accept death as irreversible.

**Elise:** I was raised in a Christian Science family, and the first healing that I remember is very vivid for me. I was six years old and had gotten a bike for my birthday, and I was out riding my bike in the street. I got between a rock and a curb and fell, and apparently knocked myself out on the pavement. The next thing I remembered was my dad carrying me into the house. I was crying, and all the neighbors were out asking if I was all right. My dad said that I'd be fine. I was bleeding all over his shirt, having almost bitten through my lower lip. Dad took me into their bedroom and put me down on the bed. There was no panic, just a great sense of peace and confidence in God's healing presence. One of them began reading to me from the Bible and from *Science and Health*, and the other one sat silently beside me praying. After a little while, I stopped crying and settled down to listen to what was being read about God, and about my relation to Him. Soon, I fell asleep. When I woke up a little later, I was healed. My lip had completely knit together. But beyond the physical change, there was this deep sense of peace and of the presence of divine Love, and that's what I remember most.