



# Mary Baker Eddy: The Role of Leader

By Peter J. Henniker-Heaton

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The discovery of Christian Science by Mary Baker Eddy occupies a definable period in the calendar of history. So does her founding of Christian Science. So does her writing of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* and of the *Manual of The Mother Church*. Without our necessarily pinpointing exact dates, each of these three activities began and has now ended. Each of them continues to bear fresh fruit in human thought and action as we gain new insights into them at ever-deeper levels; but the discovery and founding of Christian Science are now complete, and no changes can be made in Mrs. Eddy's text of *Science and Health* or of the *Church Manual*.

With Mrs. Eddy's leadership of the Christian Science movement it is different. This leadership has no chronological end. It is ongoing and will so remain. On June 3, 1891, the year before Mrs. Eddy reorganized her church as The First Church of Christ, Scientist, a letter from Mrs. Eddy was read at a gathering of her students in Boston. It assured those present: "I am still with you on the field of battle, taking forward marches, broader and higher views, and with the hope that you will follow."<sup>1</sup> Some two years earlier Mrs. Eddy had moved from Boston to Concord, New Hampshire, and she was to reside in Concord for nearly twenty years; but here she gave notice of her intentions. She had not left the field of her labors or relinquished her leadership:

On Sunday, December 4, 1910, the congregation at morning service in The Mother Church heard an announcement, read from the platform just before the closing benediction. This announcement told of Mrs. Eddy's passing the previous night, and her words quoted above were included in it. From now on The Christian Science Board of Directors, which Mrs. Eddy had established, and the other officers of The Mother Church would bear a new degree of responsibility for discharging the duties Mrs. Eddy had assigned them in the *Church Manual*. But as Leader of the Christian Science movement, Mary Baker Eddy remained and would remain where she had always been, at the head of her followers.

## A Leader who follows Christ

At the period Mrs. Eddy first became known as Leader, the terms leader and leadership were generally well regarded. But since World War I certain historical events and social trends have given a somewhat different coloration to these terms. On the one hand leader, leadership, and leader-principle were for some decades closely identified with monstrous political tyrannies. On the other, many individuals and peoples with an increased and wholly proper desire to exercise personal and political self-government have rebelled against strong leadership or what might be regarded as the "star" system in politics and social organization. The combination of these two developments has created in thoughtful circles, certainly throughout democratic nations, a wary suspicion of anyone called a leader or claiming to exercise leadership. Even when a desire for old-fashioned leadership is sometimes expressed, it is more apt to be nostalgic than seriously thought through and meant as a solution for today.

But Christian Scientists are engaged in the Christly mission of redemption, and this includes the redemption of right and useful concepts that may have become soiled by dubious associations. The Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science adopted the title of Leader specifically; in this way she ensured to the Christian Science movement a continuing living leadership. So, while admittedly the terms "leader" and "leadership" have become deeply tainted, this could be one more attempt by animal magnetism to drag down

and bury the revelation of the Christ Science and its continuing demonstration on earth. It is up to Christian Scientists in their use of these terms to preserve for them their right and useful significance. For this we need to understand the history and nature of Mrs. Eddy's leadership.

As early as August 1879 the term "Leader," having reference to Mrs. Eddy, began spreading among her followers, and it became increasingly used in the Christian Science periodicals. Finally, as of 1903 Mrs. Eddy gave formal recognition to the term "Leader" in a By-Law in the *Church Manual*.<sup>2</sup>

But in the two years preceding this formal adoption of the term Mrs. Eddy clearly and publicly indicated what the controlling motivation in her leadership would be. Toward the end of her *Message to The Mother Church for 1901*, she concluded a number of instructions to the membership with these words: "obey strictly the laws that be, and follow your Leader only so far as she follows Christ."<sup>3</sup> Then early in her *Message to The Mother Church for 1902*, she reemphasizes the same point: "I again repeat, Follow your Leader, only so far as she follows Christ."<sup>4</sup> The leadership that received formal recognition as of 1903 was not to be arbitrary. It would be under the authority of the Christ, with the Leader of Christian Science humbly following, as she always strove to do, in the steps of the master Christian and Way-shower, Christ Jesus. Mrs. Eddy's leadership is both profoundly scientific and profoundly Christian.

During her life on earth Mrs. Eddy's leadership guided the Christian Science movement as it took its first infant steps and then through its maturing growth and expansion. The story of this period has been recorded in considerable detail by various biographers and by biographical and historical sketches. These show how wisely and resolutely Mrs. Eddy's spiritual perceptions led her Church safely through the many dangers that beset it, whether in the form of open attacks or of more subtle obstruction and resistance.

In those days numerous systems of thought imitated or counterfeited the pure Christ Science she had discovered. In no area was her leadership more needed and more constantly and effectively exercised than in steering the Christian Science movement through this quagmire. Again and again Mrs. Eddy drew the line of separation with wisdom and love but also with unflinching clarity and firmness.

Much can be learned from the study of Mrs. Eddy's leadership during this formative period. But there is also great need that Christian Scientists understand the nature of Mrs. Eddy's continuing leadership right up to the present day and into the future.

## Not a personality cult

From early on Mrs. Eddy strenuously opposed any attempt to make her leadership a personality cult, to place her on a pedestal. Her manner toward people was not cold or superior; on the contrary, even during her later years of comparative withdrawal at Concord and Chestnut Hill she expressed warmth, interest, and affection. These qualities in her were apparent to members of her household, to those calling on necessary business or invited to her home, and especially to young children. But constantly by word and deed she encouraged the world to turn away from personality. It was her intent that people should seek her in her books. There they would most truly find her, as they studied and lived by the potent Christ, Truth, which had been revealed to her. In this way her followers would be led not to person but to Principle, to the divine Truth, for which, as she herself explains, "I was a scribe under orders."<sup>5</sup>

And so today, as the continuing Leader of Christian Science, Mrs. Eddy does not exercise her leadership through personality or any form of personal presence. Her followers find their guidance in her published writings, which turn them to Christ and to the divine Principle, Love. This leadership, though impersonal, is warm and affectionate. It speaks to each one as to an individual for whom the Leader of Christian Science has a deep love, concern, and interest.

Effective leaders, especially those with a large and dispersed following, have always had to devise methods of ensuring that their communications reach their individual followers without loss of accuracy or impact. Otherwise their message gets lost or distorted as it is passed from mouth to mouth down a chain of command or along from messenger to messenger. But in both the *Church Manual* and in the textbook, *Science and Health*, Mrs. Eddy uniquely solves this problem.

In the *Church Manual* at the head of the list of Church Officers and preceding the By-Laws there stands the name of Rev. Mary Baker Eddy, Pastor Emeritus. Her pastorate emeritus, like her leadership, is thus a continuing office. It ensures individual members of the Christian Science movement that, while loving and supporting those who may from time to time occupy the other church offices and while conscientiously obeying the By-Laws, they will never be separated from the Leader of Christian Science, who is also their Pastor Emeritus.

An incident related by William Dana Orcutt throws light on this point. One day he asked Mrs. Eddy whether he should consult her about certain matters in a way that would require his going over the head of her publisher, Joseph Armstrong. He records that Mrs. Eddy replied, "It will be over no one's head; Mr. Armstrong is engaged to assist me and to carry out my instructions. I am the head."<sup>6</sup> Every church member, turning to the *Church Manual*, has direct access to Mrs. Eddy's continuing impersonal guidance.

## Leadership and self-government

In the textbook, as in the *Church Manual*, its author speaks to each individual reader without mediation of time, place, or person. In *Science and Health* she is not addressing herself to a mass readership. She is not addressing her readers from a point in past time or from a localized or any other kind of pedestal, even from the Christian Science Center in Boston. She is addressing them directly in their homes, their offices, their branch churches or Reading Rooms, on land or sea or in the air, anywhere in the world where a single student is reading *Science and Health* or a congregation or small group is hearing it read. And she is addressing each one of them as an individual.

Speaking to each, the Leader of Christian Science says for all times and all places, "I hope, dear reader, I am leading you into the understanding of your divine rights, your heaven-bestowed harmony, — that, as you read, you see there is no cause (outside of erring, mortal, material sense which is not power) able to make you sick or sinful; and I hope that you are conquering this false sense."<sup>7</sup>

The leadership of Mrs. Eddy, then, is the leadership of a movement and a church, but it is also a one-to-one leadership. It leads its followers not into subjection—personal, political, or social—but into the understanding of individual divine rights and into freedom from every kind of enslavement. "God has endowed man," writes Mrs. Eddy, "with inalienable rights, among which are self-government, reason, and conscience. Man is properly self-governed only when he is guided rightly and governed by his Maker, divine Truth and Love."<sup>8</sup> True leadership bears no relationship to the tyrannous political systems of this century nor to anything that would lessen individual self-reliance. The end product of true leadership, as exemplified in Mrs. Eddy's leadership and in her following of the Christ, is universal spiritual self-government fulfilling the creative purpose of divine Truth and Love. Its discipline is the strictest yet most flexible of all disciplines, self-discipline; and it makes no one surrender a newly found and newly liberated identity.

## The future of leadership

What of the future? A figure of speech borrowed by Mrs. Eddy from the parables of Jesus is that of the leaven. She expected the teachings of Christian Science to leaven, to penetrate and transform the scientific, religious, and medical thinking of her day and indeed the thinking behind every human activity. And this is already happening, though often unrecognized even by Christian Scientists. The identifiable Christian Science movement, with its edifices, activities, and membership, is only a small part of the progress Mrs. Eddy's leadership of Christian Science has brought to an awakening world.

As the effect of the leaven increases, it is likely that there may appear more and more approximations to the Science of Christ. These, while progressive and praiseworthy, may not recognize their debt to the Christ Science and in thought and conduct, or in both, may fall short of its purity. Then just as Mrs. Eddy's leadership brought the early Christian Scientists through the imitations and counterfeits, as explained already, so her leadership will bring Christian Scientists of today and tomorrow safely through any temptation to be satisfied with the approximations. She will continue to lead her movement forward with the pure Word of Truth while the approximations are being further leavened and brought to the point of their final yielding to the fullness of Christian Science and its demonstration.

Inasmuch as Mrs. Eddy follows Christ, her leadership is part of the unfolding mission of salvation—to save, not to condemn, the world that God so loved and so loves. This mission goes back through the pages of the Bible to the beginnings of human history. It must reach forward through history until the human story yields finally to the divine fact—man revealed in God's likeness, wholly spiritual and complete.

The Psalmist prayed to God, "O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me."<sup>9</sup> This was the spirit of Christ Jesus' prayer as exemplified in his whole life. This was the spirit of Mrs. Eddy's prayer as she followed the Christ. And this is the prayer of all Christian Scientists as they follow their Leader in the footsteps of Christ, Truth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 136;↑.

<sup>2</sup> See *Man.*, Art. XXII, Sect. 1;↑.

<sup>3</sup> '01., p. 34;↑.

<sup>4</sup> '02., p. 4;↑.

<sup>5</sup> *Mis.*, p. 311;↑.

<sup>6</sup> *Mary Baker Eddy and Her Books* (Boston: The Christian Science Publishing Society, 1950), pp. 58-59;↑.

<sup>7</sup> *Science and Health*, p. 253;↑.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106;↑.

<sup>9</sup> *Ps.* 43:3;↑.

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