



HIGHER GROUND

Spirituality and relationships for life's journey.

EZINE

Unity in Diversity

Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ...And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: KJV Ephesians 4:7, 11-13

*The Message offers an interesting wording of verse seven and the verse that precedes it: **Everything you (the church) are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.***

The privilege I am being afforded of visiting Christian Science communities across the nation, and living amongst the largest – gathered from around the country – here in St. Louis, has blessed me immeasurably. A common question brought to me through visits, emails, and phone calls, is how to make change in one's branch church when there appear to be divided camps as to how to do so. And I have had conversations with faithful individuals representing both "camps".

Lessons from Scripture

All that we feel we are facing has been faced before...in the Bible. The Old Testament includes a remarkable variety of books, some developing ideas surrounding God's justice and others the theme of God's mercy. The fact that both viewpoints are represented in the canon suggests that we need to consider not only both views, but their seeming contradictions as well.

In the New Testament, the dialogue regarding what it means to be a church member moves from practicing justice as principled purity and observant discipline at one end of the spectrum to demonstrating mercy as compassionate tolerance and inclusive diversity at the other. One may locate his or her own disposition as being more toward one end of the spectrum than the other, but if we take the Bible seriously – both ends of the spectrum need to be considered, and respected.

The lessons of Scripture are that the tensions of this dialogue may be dealt with in a creative, affirming, and edifying manner or a destructive, divisive, and embittering one. I am struck that Mrs. Eddy made such a huge emphasis on this in the *Church Manual*. In Article VIII entitled "Discipline" – a word derived from making disciples or disciple-ing – our Leader writes 31 sections guiding our development as followers of Christ in Christian Science. Almost one third of those sections deal with how we are to treat each other. We do well to note what our Leader repeatedly required of faithful students, what practices she denounced, and what she decided to not talk about at all. Then we may challenge ourselves by asking how those who know us – individually as well as a church body – would view how faithful our practice is to our profession.

As one example, we might look at how those whom we have raised as young people in the church view the way we treat each other (let alone the stranger at our door or the one per-

ceived as having "strayed" or "fallen" in our midst). On occasion, might those we've raised in the church see us judging others behind their backs or appealing immediately to the Executive Board to resolve a concern, even as we preach *Manual*-based standards like Matthew 18 that demand direct communication with those with whom we're feeling at odds.

The much more common scenario I encounter is that the next generation reports having seen us practice – to near perfection – a superficial politeness that would seem to encourage a pretension, a mask wearing, an avoidance of difficult questions, an obfuscation of emotionally challenging issues that might expose a rawness – or messiness -- we would prefer to avoid. Sometimes this continues into what is considered acceptable communication within our families.

Often I hear people muse as to why so very many children, now grown, are no longer involved in the church that

nurtured them when they were young. Might one – at least contributing – reason be that far from actually realizing our fear that they didn't "get" us – that they actually "got" us all too well? They are frequently saying, with love and often appreciation for the good they do see – "we don't want our spiritual journey to be like yours" – from styles of relating to one another, to forms of worship, to adherence to organizational dos and don'ts. Even when some of them maintain an interest in Christian Science, or Mrs. Eddy, or at least our prayers for them, they may not see church as a vital part of their spiritual journey.

Teachings from the Bible, as well as the *Church Manual*, are lost sight of when the "sides" in any relationship *argue with* rather than *listen to* one another. This is particularly regretful when the "sides" try to abusively use out-of-context quotes from the Bible, or Mrs. Eddy, to "proof-text" why their side deserves ascendancy. The lesson of Scripture is that both voices are needed, like feet and hands in the body of Christ. We are not all supposed to be alike, and our unity in Christ (as opposed to what passes as unity in the world) is not based on sameness.

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Proof of the *genuine* demonstration of our divinely bestowed identity is growth in our humanity. Jesus said that love based on loving those like you (sameness) is no big sign of spiritual dominion, as even baser individuals practice that. The defining mark of the follower of Christ is found in his or her capacity to love "other" – that which is different from one's self.

The gospel writers emphasize – time and time again – instances of Jesus shocking his Jewish audiences by speaking to, and even praising as models of faith, "other" types of people who either sought him or that he approached. Matthew even opens his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus that only mentions four women – and each of them had histories of origin and conduct that were seen as scandalous and impure ("other") by the Jews. We ask, in all these instances, why the writer wants us to know this information. It is a pretty direct assault on the smugness of any individual or group that would draw narrow lines about one group or side being totally right in every circumstance all the time.

One's success, then, is not premised on the persuasive power to change the mind of the other, or the political acumen to gather enough power or votes to "win" a particular position against the other. It is found, first and foremost, in whether we are truly able to appreciate and embrace (not just tolerate and allow) the voice and contribution that differs from our own.

Models for Practicing Unity While Celebrating Diversity

This discussion, of what constitutes true unity in a time of turmoil and change, comes straight from Acts in the New Testament; and it is happening all over Christianity today. One advocate of deepening the conversation on this subject is Christian pastor and author Brian McLaren, who states that no one seems particularly happy with the status quo of Christianity today. The issue is whether the better alternative is to be found in going *back* or *ahead*. He quotes a source a number of Christian Scientists have enjoyed reading, author Len Sweet, who suggests that to move from where we are we need to practice a paradoxical movement we learned as small children. We need to remember how to swing.

On a playground swing set, a child leans forward, while simultaneously

kicking back – and then vice versa. Movement, joy, and laughter happen only when apparently contradicting actions – going in opposite directions -- occur at the same time.

McLaren writes, "Resisting change or fearing change can change you to become resistant and fearful. It's also possible to change badly. Our choice isn't between change and no change, but rather between wise change and foolish changes. We shouldn't be too hard on one another here. Those of us who feel called to originality and innovation shouldn't use harsh language on our more cautious brothers (and sisters). Nor should they judge us."

McLaren offers two of his own illustrations to make his point.

- A tree has a trunk and roots that change very slowly and are generally inflexible, as they should be. Branches, on the other hand, need some give; and the leaves even more, as they are positively flimsy, flexible, and whimsical when the wind blows. Yet their stems bind them, like kite string, to that which doesn't move. The leaves will die without the trunk and root. The reverse is also true, though it is not as immediately obvious.
- At the time of the westward expansion in America, a minority of people called pioneers felt the call of mountains and prairies and set off to make paths where no paths had been. Their efforts were inherently messy, often requiring retracing steps and course corrections – after all there were no markers or street signs. Most folks stayed in the civilized territories with closer ties to the Old Country. If everyone had vacated the colonies for the new territories all at once, it would have been a disaster. If none had ventured out, it would have been terribly sad.

In the spirit of Ephesians, pioneers should not revile settlers for their cautious nature, nor should settlers

judge harshly the efforts, let alone the motives, of pioneers. The positive movement of change will have less to do with which side wins the debates, than how each side cherishes the motives and contributions of the other side.

Christian author John Claypool, a pastor like McLaren, said it well. A great lesson is to be found in how nature functions. In nature we observe that: diversity promotes creativity, whereas sameness promotes sterility.

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Diversity as a theme in Scripture does not mean political correctness; it is not a behavioral obligation in an attempt at social norming. It is a deeply felt embrace of the full spectrum of God's gifts and the varied ways that God works with individuals and different faith communities – even within the same denomination. It is a celebration of the marvels that may occur when the Spirit's work is freed from "the napkin of its form" or "the grave-clothes of its letter" – no matter which side would create those constrictive garments.

Defending Against Disunity

Central to offering a healing response in the face of diverse views in church is the avoidance of extreme positions that fail to see the good in the other side.

Those under the tragic sway of such views and methods are more interested in maintaining personal power and control than the whole body advancing...together. While we understandably wish to eliminate all seeds of distrust and inharmony, it is critical that we remember that – even if they appear to still exist and be active – such seeds can only harm when they are given place to grow and take root.

When attitudes inconsistent with following Christ or obeying Mrs. Eddy, even while prolifically quoting each of them, try to raise an uncaring voice – it is absolutely essential that good people resist, strongly and passionately. Extremes often win because their ardor and vehemence seem so forceful and the consequences of not supporting their views are presented as so dire. More than one congregation has reported feeling bullied by extreme positions that use fear and counterfeit authority to divide. To my knowledge there is not one example of a Christian Science church anywhere that is growing by following such patterns of destructive relationships – although many, many churches have been decimated by them. Criticism of a harsh sort is way too easy to do when compared with what is required to build positive alternatives.

The discussion of unity in Christ can't be complete without this difficult, but necessary, discussion about toxic extremism. This type of thought at either extreme is invalid for inclusion in the Church. The reason is not just or even primarily because of its content, but because of the methods by which it pursues its goals. It fails, in the language of Ephesians, to *edify* or build up the body of Christ. Rather such attitudes act as a cancer to the body of Christ – growing unnaturally and attempting to rob healthy organs of vitality.

In "Ways that are Vain" Mrs. Eddy identifies the patterns of such toxic thought that profess the exact opposite of what they do. They hide under a cloak of piety and then promote discord by planting "suspicious distrust where honor is due" and "a belief in safety where there is most danger". Their

method of mis-treating and maligning others, sometimes including intentional malpractice, provides some of those very rare grounds in the *Church Manual* for excommunication from the Church of Christ, Scientist.

In Steve Gottschalk's new biography of Mrs. Eddy, we are reminded of how our Leader faced similar, serpent-like challenges from Hopkins, Woodbury, Stetson and others that would still try to kill the Christ-spirit today just as it went after Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago. We need not fear evil, but neither should we close our eyes to it and its means of operation, or appease it by trying to placate it.

There are strong and vibrant signs of renewal within our beloved Movement today – but not all who are nurturing these signs are in agreement as to how to proceed in the demonstration of branch church. I am grateful for all the voices that can cherish those who are different in their gifts and disposition than themselves, and in doing so are able to make from a single note... a beautiful chord.



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Founder and Director of Higher Ground

If you would like to receive future Higher Ground Ezines, please go to www.highergroundforlife.com and sign up for these free, periodic newsletters.

I'm also attaching, on the following page, some comments by Edward Kimball C.S.D. on the absolute primacy of authentically loving others in church. I hope that you find them as inspiring, helpful, and challenging as I have.

“Love an Absolute Essential”

The following is from a talk by Edward Kimball, C.S.D. During Mrs. Eddy's last decade, she chose him more often than anyone else to teach the Normal class that prepares practitioners to become teachers of Christian Science. A remarkable healer, teacher and speaker, giving over 1000 lectures in a 9 year period, he speaks here of the centrality of Christian character, grace and love to the practice of Christian Science.

How many times do we practice idle criticism, or even mentally lay a burden of reproach and condemnation on our brother, when he forsooth may be in the privacy of thought, weeping hot tears because he is not better able to do his Master's will. And how long shall we be in forgiving? We are told that there is no eternity in evil. Are we holding our brother in unforgiveness? Are we never going to forgive him? Never will we get health, never will we get the reciprocity of mankind until we learn to forgive, to be merciful, forbearing and loving.

Let us go back once more to the cause of Christian Science. Here we are all of us human beings. Is any one of us perfect? Are we not all of us most ready in saying, "I am chief among sinners"? Two or three students of mine came to see me, and talked about some people in their town who were not behaving very well, and one of them, impetuous and enthusiastic, a new student, said: "Well, what are we to do with such people? Shall we turn them away and have nothing to do with them?" and so on. I said, "What is the matter? Do you think they are not entirely worthy?" "No." "Well, do you expect entirely worthy people to run your church? Do you suppose if we were to range ourselves before the Infinite, that we, any of us, would pass muster? Do you know that Mrs. Eddy is having to run this cause with sinners?"

Practically, we are all sinners, every last one of us. We look upon a person who is sixty per cent bad and forty per cent good, and condemn the bad. She knows enough to use the forty per cent that is good. That is what we want to do. To make the most of the forty per cent that is our brother, and wait for it to be fifty or sixty. The great problem is to get along with each other. We become detectives, as it were, and we become expert in mind, and we become very critical because of righteous judgment. Then what we want to do is to repress the exaggerated condition of the human mind. The fact of the matter is, if my brothers would get along with me, I would prefer to get along with them, as a general thing. Now the solution of earth's problem is to be found in that which solves life. It makes no difference how many churches you have, it makes no difference how many societies, how many books are sold, how many papers are subscribed for, if there is not Love manifested as the dominant influence, you have no church, you have no Christian Science, you have no real genuine healing, no heaven in sight whatsoever. All is lost if we are not learning to love.

Lectures and Articles on Christian Science by Edward A. Kimball, pages 468-470

From Mary Baker Eddy (emphasis added):

What we most need is the prayer of fervent desire for growth in grace, expressed in patience, meekness, love, and good deeds. *S&H* (4)

The test of all prayer lies in the answer to these questions: Do we love our neighbor better because of this asking? Do we pursue the old selfishness...? *S&H* (9)

I am persuaded that only by the modesty and distinguishing affection illustrated in Jesus' career, can Christian Scientists aid the establishment of Christ's kingdom on the earth. *Ret* (94)

Of two things fate cannot rob us; namely, of choosing the best, and of helping others thus to choose. But in doing this the Master became the servant. The grand must stoop to the menial. There is scarcely an indignity which I have not endured for the cause of Christ, Truth, and I returned blessing for cursing. The best help the worst; the righteous suffer for the unrighteous; and by this spirit man lives and thrives, and by it God governs. *My* (165)