

# *President's Fall Convocation Address*

Principia College  
September 14, 2006





I often use my annual convocation talk to speak to some pressing global issue or to the need to focus on our obligations, as citizens and as Christian Scientists, to a world that's needing some real attention.

I confess that what usually triggers such comments is some indication of how far we have to go in this respect. Like this survey that I ran across recently, a poll that indicates that nearly half of all Americans can identify at least two members of the Simpson family on Fox TV but that only one American in 1000 — that's one person in an audience twice this size — can name the five freedoms protected in the First Amendment.<sup>1</sup> Believe it or not, about one-quarter of Americans believe one of the five freedoms protected in the First Amendment is the right to own a pet. What can I say? I told our little dog Sammy about this and he thought it was really cool that people thought he was protected by the First Amendment.

Now this kind of poll would normally trigger a burst of righteous indignation about what inattentive citizens we are. But today, actually, I'm going to resist this temptation and, instead, focus on things a little closer to home. I've been at Principia now for a number of years, and every year, it seems, the same few comments and concerns keep coming up, mostly from students and mostly regarding the College's moral standards — the fact that they exist or the way they're enforced. So I'd like to use my 30 minutes today to speak to these concerns, as honestly as I can, in the hope that, if nothing else, it will be the catalyst for some further conversation.

Back in the 19th century, there was a famous Protestant theologian named Phillips Brooks. He wrote some stirring words that were reprinted in a 1906 issue of the *Christian Science Sentinel*. Here is what he wrote: “God has not given us vast learning to solve all the [world's] problems or unfailing wisdom to direct all the wanderings of our brothers' lives; but he has given to every one of us the power to be spiritual, and by our spirituality to lift and enlarge and enlighten the lives we touch.”

Under this quotation, in pencil, Mary Baker Eddy wrote: “The secret of my life is in the above.”<sup>2</sup> I’ve always been quite moved by this, in part, I think, because the quote also speaks so directly to the large purposes of a Principia education and to the significance of adherence to the moral law, which gives us the power both to be spiritual and to lift, enlarge, and enlighten the lives of others. So, with this in mind, let me address seven specific concerns that seem to be hardy perennials at the College and that merit the most thoughtful responses we can provide.

### Here’s concern #1: PRINCIPIA IS ALWAYS JUDGING PEOPLE.

I think maybe the concern stems from the fact that we’re made continually aware of what Mrs. Morgan refers to in Policy #22, namely, that the conduct of Principians needs to be consonant with the standards of Christian Science. And my response to this concern is: yes, I suppose we do judge here to a greater degree than most schools. But this affirmative response requires some important qualifications.

We live in a culture that puts an extremely high premium on not judging and so in this context our standards at Principia certainly do stand out in sharp relief. And sometimes we justify non-judgment by saying something like, “Christ Jesus loved everybody, didn’t he? He never judged.” Well, actually, he did judge. Certainly in an absolute sense he loved as no one on earth — except, perhaps, the founder of our religion — has ever loved. But in his human experience he was highly discriminating because he knew that error needed to be seen, rebuked, and expelled from the human experience in order to free mankind from the shackles of human belief. When he befriended publicans and prostitutes, it was those whose thought he rightly judged to be receptive to, and really yearning for, the truth that makes free. And the Bible tells us that there were many villages and towns into which he did not enter for precisely the opposite reason. His rebuke was “fearful,” we’re told. So Christ Jesus did judge. But the key for Christ Jesus was judging righteous judgment — not pre-judging, not being judgmental, not judging with the aim of condemning but with the motive, and only with

the motive, of steering people away from acts and behavior that were inconsistent with spiritual growth.

I like the way one Bible commentator puts it. “It is indeed often the Christian’s duty to judge and severely to condemn things which the world never thinks of judging.”<sup>3</sup> Notice: he speaks of condemning “things,” not “people.” So when Jesus admonishes that we judge not, he doesn’t mean that we ignore error, but that we avoid “unkind and frivolous criticism.” That’s the critical distinction here. Another commentator puts it this way: Jesus drew “a line between ethical appraisal and sharp-tongued criticism,” he says, “and bids us keep on the right side of the line.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus rebuked error to destroy it but he always saw man’s real spiritual innocence. There was a deep compassion and sense of forgiveness about him, even when he was rebuking sin. His purpose was to forgive and to wipe out sin, with mercy, charity, patience, and the most tender compassion.

Upholding standards that are indispensable to spiritual growth is certainly part of the mission of Principia as Mrs. Morgan has defined it for us. She believed that Principia should care enough for its students to do this. But the key here is always the motive. This work of righteous judgment cannot be done if the motive is censure. It can only be done if the motive is to bless by lifting out of ways that impede progress. This is central to what Principia is about.

Here’s issue #2, and it’s closely related. It goes like this: **PRINCIPIA HAS TOO MANY RULES.**

Yes, Principia does have a fair number of rules relative to moral standards — more rules, to be sure, than most colleges. So the question is: Is this a bad thing?

The fact is, even though most of the world might not agree, that guidelines for moral behavior are indispensable in human experience. The Bible tells us that, in Old Testament days, when fathers were asked by their sons, “Why do we have all these statutes?,” the answer was that all these statutes saved us from the bondage of the Egyptians, got us through 40 years in the wilderness, and made it possible to get into the promised land. In other words, it was because

the statutes were really key to human progress, as are the standards of Principia that reflect the teachings of Christian Science. The Bible says, “[T]he Lord commanded us to do all these statutes . . . for our good always. . . .” It’s the “for our good always”<sup>25</sup> part that’s so important.

Yes, you might ask, but don’t I have to learn all these lessons on my own instead of being obedient to the moral law just because of Principia’s rules? Well, a lot of people certainly do choose to do it this way. But I wonder if it’s really *necessary* to do it this way. Take any person in the human race, let him push the limits of human behavior to the farthest extreme, let him endure the suffering that will inevitably follow, and then ask him where the lines of human behavior should be drawn. I’m certain he will draw them pretty much where Moses drew them 3,500 years ago, and where Christ Jesus drew them in a somewhat more benign way in the Sermon on the Mount 1,500 years after that. The point is that we don’t have to figure out on our own what lots of people before us have already figured out the hard way. We would never do this — ignore the lessons those before us have learned — in any other field of human endeavor. It’s curious, then, that when it comes to moral lessons so many people insist on ignoring history and learning the hard way. Mrs. Eddy makes pretty clear that we don’t have to do it this way.

There’s an old joke — a very old joke — about Moses. He comes down from Mount Sinai, holding the two tablets. The Children of Israel eagerly await news of what happened. “Well,” he says, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I got him down to ten. The bad news is that adultery is still in.” Well, I’m obliged to report that adultery is *still* in, and so are lots of other things. And they’re in for one reason only, and that’s because their avoidance is directly related to happiness and spiritual growth. There’s no other reason.

Now, we certainly have to be clear that just because we abstain from various things, that doesn’t automatically make us good Christian Scientists. I think people make this mistake sometimes. Abstinence, per se, doesn’t have much to do with spiritual growth. Hitler was a teetotaler, after all. No, it’s the motive behind abstinence that links to spiritual

growth, and that motive should reflect a desire to rely on God for what the world says material means alone can provide — meaning such things as right relationships and a settled sense of self-worth.

It's not entirely easy to say this in the culture of moral relativism we all live in, but it is true that every step we take down any wrong path will eventually have to be retraced. That is the divine law of justice. You're obviously going to have to make your own decisions on these matters, but this fact is worth bearing in mind as you do. Principia's moral standards, which are expressions of the teachings of Christian Science, have been in place for a century now as a way of saying — with the greatest sense of love — “You don't have to learn these things the hard way;” “We care for you enough that we want to help you avoid the complications in life that inevitably follow the crossing of moral lines.” That's all that's going on here with the rules of Principia. They are the key to freedom. Violating these rules is not an act of rebellion but an act of total conformity with the world's stereotype of how college students should lead their lives. You see, the world needs your strength and independence, not your submission to the influences of a confused culture.

One Bible scholar notes that Christ Jesus “sharply” contradicted his age,<sup>6</sup> and I think we're called upon to do the same. But the good news here is that the purpose of such discipline is an abundant life. “His prohibitions,” this scholar notes, “are always means to enrichment.” In the last analysis, you see, the rules of Principia aren't really the main issue. The main issue is living lives of freedom. And all Mrs. Morgan ever wanted is for Principia to be nudging its students in the direction of freedom.

Now, that was a long one, so let's turn, more briefly, to the others on my list of seven. Here's issue #3, and it goes this way: **YOU CAN'T TALK TO ANYONE AROUND HERE WITHOUT GETTING KICKED OUT OF SCHOOL.**

This actually was the case once upon a time. But a few years ago the College instituted confidential counseling, which makes it possible for any student to have extended

conversations with any faculty or staff member about anything without risk of discipline. There are scores of people on campus — dedicated faculty and staff members — who are here for you, to help you think through anything you might be dealing with. So do take advantage of the opportunity. If Principia's standards — or to be more precise, the standards of Christian Science — don't make sense to you, that's OK. This is a great place to figure these things out. These are questions we've all asked as college students. If you don't understand why drinking or pre-marital sex — or whatever — are inadvisable, and if you don't ask, you're wasting \$100,000, because there's no college more capable of helping you acquire a real understanding of the solid logic that lies behind moral standards. That's what everyone's here for, to help you figure these things out.

I guess I'd have to add that if you've made the choice to live life at Prin under the radar screen — if you really have no interest in honoring one Principia standard or other — then this is another thing altogether. In this case, I'd have to say, there lies some measure of dishonesty, given that everyone knows coming in the front door what Principia stands for. But even if you have crossed a line, it's never too late. There's nothing any one of you could ever do that could place you outside the circle of our affections. As I said earlier, Principia — reflecting the theology of Christian Science — is certainly about high standards. There couldn't be a Principia without this. But there could also never be a Principia that didn't have as its highest goal regarding each one of its students with the utmost compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Here's issue #4: THERE'S A LOT OF HYPOCRISY AT PRINCIPIA.

I think the issue here may be that when people see Principia's high standards on one hand, and on the other that some who are known to violate them are never brought to account, there seems to be a major inconsistency.

There's no doubt that whenever any organization institutionalizes standards of morality it runs the risk of appearing hypocritical. But let me be pretty blunt here: the

hypocrisy does not lie with the institution which has the courage to hold up — and as fairly as possible to uphold — the standards that are consistent with the teachings of Christian Science and are thus in the best interests of its students. The hypocrisy lies, rather, with those who, knowing these standards and having pledged to live by them, nevertheless choose to violate them.

When it comes to moral violations, the College is not on a witch hunt. It just deals with the cases it knows about. The obvious problem here is that sometime someone's going to be brought to account in the Community Board process while other violators are not. That's probably an inevitable state of affairs unless one of two things happens:

The first is that we could say as an institution that since the College can't hold *everyone* accountable it shouldn't hold *anyone* accountable. That's not a very viable option, for reasons that I hope are fairly obvious.

Option number two *is* viable, and that's a larger measure of moral courage on the part of those who are aware of lines being crossed. I don't mean this to sound severe or critical. I know this is difficult. But if the working premise here is correct — that violating moral standards is inimical to spiritual growth — then the best we could ever do for a friend would be, with the greatest sense of love, to urge a change of behavior. The alternative is to allow a friend to continue down a path that will eventually have to be retraced, perhaps at great cost. I know this runs counter to the culture of non-judgment we've just been talking about. But the culture notwithstanding, non-judgment is not a virtue. What could possibly be virtuous about looking the other way when a friend needs the love that demands moral courage? Non-judgment is avoidance. It is not real love.

As a footnote, I should say that any institution that holds up high standards has an obligation to enforce them with the utmost integrity, and I can attest to the extraordinary integrity brought to these issues by Community Board and the Office of Student Life. That said, we're a human institution striving towards a high ideal and always trying to do better. That's one reason OSL and student government have been working closely to consider an alternative method of responding to

social violations. It's called "restorative justice," and you'll be hearing more about a possible pilot project this quarter. It's a good step of progress for us.

#### Here's issue #5: PRINCIPIA'S RULES ARE DRIVING PEOPLE UNDERGROUND.

I think the important point to be made here is that Principia is not forcing students into patterns of behavior that are abnormal but helping draw out what is spiritually *normal*, namely, our students' intelligent love of purity, responsibility, and commitment.

To get to the bottom of this issue, we've taken a close look at how Principia is doing relative to lots of other colleges around the nation. And this is what we've found. Far from the College driving students away from its values, Principia students report on national surveys that they are much more satisfied than students at other church-related schools with the guidance and encouragement they get from their faculty and staff. They have a stronger sense of engagement and belonging in the community. And on every measure of religious engagement — church attendance, hours in prayer, hymn singing, scripture reading, discussions about spiritual matters — they are more active by up to 70 percent.

At the end of their first year, for three years in a row now, our freshmen have indicated that their number-one objective in college is "integrating spirituality into their life." That was 94 percent compared with only 56 percent on average for church-related schools. Our students ranked this substantially higher than being financially well off. Their second highest objective was helping others in difficulty. And they reported that their religious skills, beliefs, and convictions were much stronger at the end of the year than when they started college. The data make it clear that the way the College supports, educates, and engages students actually reduces the storm and stress the world says — incorrectly — has to be a normal part of the passage to adulthood.

I guess it's axiomatic, by the world's logic, that having community standards inevitably prompts people to push against them. But I sense that we're disproving that logic

here to a significant degree. Can we do better? Yes, there's no doubt about that. I hope you'll work together with us on this so that we *can* do better. At the end of the day, Principia could not be Principia without high standards since the school exists to serve the Cause of Christian Science, which deems obedience to the moral law indispensable to spiritual growth. Words like "purity" and "innocence" seem oddly out of sync with the culture of our times. But these are the preeminent qualities of real manhood and womanhood and they are the surest defense we can ever have against every form of evil, including contagion. Given the world's concerns just now regarding the matter of contagion, this is probably an important point to bear in mind.

The last two issues or concerns that I hear about with some regularity pertain less to community standards and more to the subject of Christian Science itself.

So here's concern #6 on my list of seven: **CHURCH IS FILLED WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE PRETENDING TO BE PERFECT.**

I suppose there are people of many faiths who go to church just to keep up appearances. But this is a pretty hard judgment on the vast majority of churchgoers who know they're not perfect and want to learn how to be perfect. That's who church is for. Church is for people who have the humility to recognize the need for growth and who choose to put themselves in an environment where growth will happen — and who have a sufficient degree of unselfishness that they're willing to support an institution, the prosperity of which may bear, as much as anything in the world, on the happiness and well-being of humanity.

Going to church is not a visible symbol of perfection. It's a visible symbol of the earnestness and consecration that are the preconditions to perfection. Someone observed once that if we fully understood church — Mrs. Eddy's vision and concept of the Christian Science church — we would walk into every service with a profound sense of awe. And so it should be. It was Mrs. Eddy's expectation — and it should be ours — that the deaf, the blind, the lame, the halt, the weary, the broken-hearted should walk out of Christian

Science church services healed and restored. Consider for a moment just how powerful this would be. This is within our reach, but it will only happen if we bring into these services the consecration and inspiration that will call forth such divine blessings.

One of you recently shared an wonderful observation on church from a well-known Bible commentary. The writer says that:

shallow talk may often be heard from people who say that they do not need to go to church because God can be worshiped anywhere. Why cannot He be found equally well out under the open sky, on the hills, in the fields . . . as a matter of fact, on a golf club veranda, on the first tee, or the eighteenth green? . . . Theoretically, he might be. . . . Jesus did find beauty in the Galilee lilies or under the silences of the stars, but he knew God there because he knew him also in the place where since he was a little boy he had gone to think of him, in the house of worship consecrated to his presence, where the revelation of himself was both intensely and particularly set forth. . . . For a soul in isolation the fire may die, as the fire dies out in a coal set off by itself; but as coals, each one of which was only partially glowing, when brought together turn into a flame, so do the souls of men when they are brought together in corporate worship attain the glowing heat which one by one they might have lost.<sup>7</sup>

That's beautifully put. This is what draws to church the most sincere seekers for Truth.

Now for issue #7 — the last on my list: *SCIENCE AND HEALTH DOESN'T SEEM RELEVANT ANY LONGER. IT'S GOOD AS FAR AS IT GOES, BUT THE WORLD HAS CHANGED SINCE IT WAS WRITTEN.*

I actually hear this one pretty often. And I guess I can only respond by saying that the textbook remains untouched by time and is as relevant now as it always has been and as it always will be. Mrs. Eddy describes *Science and Health* as the “final revelation of the absolute divine Principle of scientific mental healing.” As one of the two most enlightened people in human history, she should be authority enough on the matter.

But we don't have to take her word for it. Ask the young man whose testimony appeared in a recent *Christian Science Sentinel*. He was crippled and deformed. When he first heard of Christian Science he decided to attend a lecture. He had to drag his body up steep stairs to the church door, "slowly, painfully, and patiently," as he describes it. An hour later, he left, walking and leaping and praising God — just like the man at the gate of the temple who was healed by Peter and John. Ask him if *Science and Health* is still relevant.<sup>8</sup>

Or ask the woman — also writing in the periodicals — who concluded one evening that death was imminent because of an illness. She had prayed about it, deeply, for months. One evening, while she was talking a walk with her little dog, she said to God, "I'm not going to make it, am I, Father?" Then she sat down on the rail of a little bridge that crossed a canal near her home. As she describes it, "My head was down, my shoulders were down; discouragement overwhelmed me." Then she noticed on the surface of the water the reflection of a full moon. And all of a sudden, everything she had been praying about — everything the textbook says about man as God's reflection — came into perfect focus. As she describes it, a "spiritual recognition dawned in my consciousness with a brightness that outshone the moon, and I said, 'I'm looking at the reflection, but I'm seeing the original!' My inseparability from good was crystal-clear to me. . . . Through this spiritual influx the love of God flooded my consciousness." One moment she despaired of imminent death. Moments later, as she walked home, she was completely and permanently healed.<sup>9</sup> Ask her if the textbook has been overtaken by events.

If I may suggest, ever so gently, it may be that if *Science and Health* seems irrelevant it's because, in our fast-paced lives, we just may not be taking the time required for its consecrated study — or making the effort to conform our lives to its demands. And then we respond by saying something like, "Well, Christian Science just doesn't really work like it used to." If this is the mind-set we're in, then perhaps we're not in an ideal position to judge the continuing relevance of the textbook or its teachings. Christian Science is more than a low-cost health care system. It's a way of life. And unless we're willing to reconcile ourselves to its demands rather than trying to force it to conform to our

life-styles, we may miss out on the glorious possibilities that come with being a Christian Scientist — and on the enduring redemptive power of the textbook.

All of which brings me now to the end. It's the "reconciling ourselves to the demands of Christian Science" — "action in obedience to God," as Mrs. Eddy describes it<sup>10</sup> — that's at the heart of every one of the issues we've been talking about this afternoon, that's at the heart of the remarkable statement by Phillips Brooks I read at the beginning, and that Mrs. Eddy herself says was the very secret of her life. You see, there's so much at stake here, and what's at stake is our capacity to be role models of moral courage in a world that, as it happens, is quite short of role models just now. God *has* given every one of us the power to be spiritual — and by our spirituality, as Phillips Brooks says, to "lift and enlarge and enlighten the lives we touch." It's hard to conceive of anything that could bring greater satisfaction in life.

In a world that has ceased to care much about moral character, Principia continues to care, and to care greatly. It cares because it believes deeply in each one of you — perhaps more deeply than you know. It cares because it has the utmost confidence that you will be the role models and healers that, through your deep compassion and love for mankind, will draw mankind to the truth. And being such, in the words of Isaiah, the nations "shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising."<sup>11</sup>

Thank you.

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- <sup>1</sup> Anna Johnson, “Simpsons better known than rights, poll finds,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 1, 2006, p. A-2.
- <sup>2</sup> Emma Shipman reminiscences, unpublished, p. 20
- <sup>3</sup> J.R. Dummelow, ed., The One Volume Bible Commentary (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1909), p. 649.
- <sup>4</sup> Interpreters Bible, Vol. 7, p. 325.
- <sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:24
- <sup>6</sup> Interpreters Bible, Vol. 7, p. 297.
- <sup>7</sup> Interpreters Bible, Vol. 8, pp. 89-90.
- <sup>8</sup> Phillip Hockley, “News of Healing,” Christian Science Sentinel, Vol. 104, No. 31, August 5, 2002, pp. 25-26.
- <sup>9</sup> Corinne Jane Teeter, “Disease statistics – or the power of divine law?,” The Christian Science Journal, Vol. 114, March 1996, pp. 19-21.
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, Miscellaneous Writings (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1924), p. 267:27-28.
- <sup>11</sup> Isaiah 60:3

