

Do Healings Confirm the Truth of the Christian Gospel?

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ABSTRACT

According to the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition, miraculous healings confirm the truth of the Gospel. The present article argues that this view is in line with many New Testament texts. However, there is an ongoing debate about whether such an understanding can be upheld considering today's medical science. According to metaphysical naturalism, all healings, even the most extraordinary ones, can be explained by purely natural causes. Craig Keener challenges this position. The present article discusses his viewpoints and also includes examples of healing reports to illustrate.

Further, this article draws on the philosophies of science of Alister McGrath and Thomas Kuhn. Both understand scientific theories as interpretations of what is observed, viewing them holistically. Following their approach, this article argues that the Christian paradigm offers the best explanation of extraordinary or miraculous healings, and therefore is a more coherent worldview or paradigm than a naturalistic paradigm. Thus, it is argued that miraculous healings have a confirming function for the truth of the Christian message.

Keywords: Legitimizing perspective, miraculous healing, extraordinary healing, naturalistic explanation, Christian paradigm, Church.

INTRODUCTION

On a Sunday morning, in a Pentecostal church in Bryansk in Russia, an elderly woman came to the stage to testify. I had prayed for her two days earlier – for healing of her deaf ears, as well as for one of her eyes. She explained through a sign language interpreter that she could now hear the sound from the buses and cars, rather than only seeing them. In addition, her eye had been healed. She had lost her sight in this eye when, travelling by a crowded bus, her eye was injured by a boy’s fishing tool. Thereafter, she could not see anything but grey light with that eye. Now, however, she could see better with the healed eye than with the other one and was even able to read with it.¹

This is just one of many examples of healing by prayer that I have witnessed as a minister within the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition, in which healing by prayer, also known as divine healing, is one of the central doctrines (MacNutt, 1999; Purdy, 1995). In numerous cases I have watched healings as other people have prayed, but in many cases, too, I have seen healings following my own prayers.

The belief in divine healing is in no way limited to the Pentecostal-charismatic stream within the Christian Church, but it is particularly emphasized in this branch of Christianity, to which I belong. Thus, I approach the subject from this perspective. One important aspect of the emphasis on healing within this tradition is its confirming or legitimizing function. Healings, particularly extraordinary healings considered to be miraculous, are to a large extent looked upon as confirming the truth of the Christian Gospel (Wimber & Springer, 1992).

In an article entitled “Healing and Preaching” (2020), I argue that the legitimizing aspect of healing is prevalent in numerous New Testament (NT) texts (Andersen, 2020). However, there is an ongoing debate about whether such an understanding of healing can be upheld given today’s medical science (Brown, 2012; Keener, 2021; Yong, 2010). In the 2020 article, I endeavoured, through exegesis and an analytical discussion of NT scriptures, to lay a foundation for a further systematic theological discourse on this issue. In the present article, I follow this up, focusing on theological and philosophical questions relevant to the legitimizing perspective on healing. Thus, the purpose of the present article is to contribute to Pentecostal-charismatic theology regarding how the legitimizing aspect of healing can be understood systematic-theologically in view of medical science.

First, I present a biblical-theological understanding of healing, especially concerning its legitimizing aspect, based on my previous article. Thereafter, I move on to a discourse of the notion of the term “miracle”, drawing particularly on Alvin Plantinga’s arguments on the issue.

I then turn to Craig Keener’s discussion of the credibility of claims of miraculous healings, a subject on which he has published two books. The first one is his two-volume work *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2011). Here, he boldly challenges naturalistic explanations of miracles by offering what I would call an overwhelming number of examples of miraculous healings, old and new, as well as discussing scientific and philosophical questions related to the issue. The book *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World* (2021) is written more for a public audience.² Since Keener’s study has a significant bearing on my subject, I give it considerable space in my discussion. To avoid an overly theoretical and abstract discourse, I also find it important to include some examples of healings.

¹ The testimony was video recorded.

² This book was the 2022 winner of the *Pneuma* Book Award (Wariboko & Oliverio, 2022).

Thereafter, I discuss Alister McGrath's view of "inference to the best explanation" and Thomas Kuhn's emphasis on the priority of paradigms, pointing out parallels between theory or paradigm choice in science and the choice between metaphysical paradigms or worldviews such as naturalism and Christianity (Kuhn, 1970a; McGrath, 2020). Based on this discussion, I argue that Christian theology can be seen as the best explanation of many cases of healings and therefore can be seen as a more coherent worldview or paradigm than a naturalistic paradigm or worldview.

Because of the scope of the article, I limit myself to a discourse of the position of metaphysical naturalism versus Christianity. I use the term "Christian" or "Christianity" in a broad classical sense, which is based in the Pentecostal tradition. Expressions such as "the Christian Gospel," "Christian message," "Christian theology," and "Christian worldview or paradigm" are to be understood in the same way and are used interchangeably.

Finally, I sum up my findings in some concluding remarks, pointing out the significance of healing to the Church's ministry of preaching the Gospel to the world.

THE LEGITIMIZING PERSPECTIVE ON HEALING

In my article "Healing and Preaching" (2020), I argue that in the NT, we find an eschatological as well as a legitimizing perspective on healing, related to preaching.³ The *eschatological* perspective understands "both healing and preaching as manifestations of the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God" (Andersen, 2020, p. 2). Together, healing and preaching express – in an essential unity – the arrival of the kingdom of God (Matt 12:28–29). However, the kingdom has not yet arrived in its fullness; it is a situation of *already – and not yet*. Thus, the healings, alongside preaching, are manifestations or signs of the preliminary arrival of the kingdom (Andersen, 2020, pp. 5–6). As Helge Kjær Nielsen points out, there is such a unity between preaching and healing that "Luke could hardly imagine a ministry of preaching that was not followed by healing miracles" (Nielsen, 1987, p. 167).⁴

The *legitimizing* perspective sees healing as confirming or legitimizing the content of the preaching. This perspective is rooted in and flows from the eschatological aspect of healing (Andersen, 2020, pp. 7–8). The healings that manifest the kingdom of God also confirm or legitimize the truth of what is proclaimed, namely the very presence of the kingdom of God.

The term *sign* (Gr. *semeion*) sums up these different aspects of healing (Mark 16:20; John 4:54; Acts 4:30; Rom. 15:19). Regarding the eschatological aspect, the healings do not just symbolize the presence of the kingdom as "outward" signs, as signs "being qualitatively different from the reality of the kingdom. No, healings as signs of the kingdom are also themselves a part of the kingdom—just as snowdrop flowers are signs of spring as well as a part of spring" (Andersen, 2020, p. 6; Nielsen, 1987, p. 167). As to the legitimizing perspective, just as snowdrop flowers, as signs, also have the character of evidence that confirms the truth of spring's arrival, healings confirm or legitimize the truth of the kingdom's arrival.

In the Gospels we see how people are "brought into a situation of decision" because of the miraculous⁵ healings following the preaching of Jesus. One example is the statement of judgement upon the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Luke 10:8–16). The healings

³ Concerning this distinction, I am indebted to Helge Kjær Nielsen's doctoral thesis (Nielsen, 1987, p. 198).

⁴ "... dass, Lukas sich kaum eine Verkündigungstätigkeit vorstellen konnte, die nicht von Heilungswundern begleitet war" (Nielsen, 1987, p. 167).

⁵ Miraculous in the NT sense of *mighty deed* or *wonder/miracle* (Gr. *dynamis, teras*).

here were so extraordinary and had such a miraculous character that they confirmed the truth of the gospel that had been preached. Thus, the people in these cities were confronted with a truth claim to which they had to respond. The judgement was due to “the rejection of the combined reality of the miracles and the preaching” (Andersen, 2020, p. 8).

The disciples were given the task of continuing the healing ministry of Jesus (Luke 10:1–9; Mark 16:15–20). Mark 16:20, with its use of the Greek term *bebaioo*, sums up its confirming or legitimizing aspect in this way: “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed [Gr. *bebaioo*] his word by the signs that accompanied it.” The Greek verb *bebaioo* means to “make firm, strengthen, confirm”, as well as to “guarantee” in a legal sense (Schönweiss, 1975, p. 658).

In Acts, where the first church’s missionary situation is described, the legitimizing aspect is illustrated by numerous texts. For example, when the church was threatened with persecution, they prayed for great boldness in preaching and asked God to stretch out his hand “to heal and to perform miraculous signs and wonders [Gr. *eis iasin kai semeia kai terata*].” (Acts 4:29–30). Obviously, the purpose of the miraculous signs and wonders was to confirm the word being preached. Thus, the perspective here resembles that of Mark 16:20 (Andersen, 2020, p. 11; Nielsen, 1987, p. 181).

The legitimizing perspective is also expressed very clearly by the apostle Paul. In Rom. 15:18–19, he sums up his missionary work in the following manner: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done - by the power of signs and miracles [Gr. *ev dunamei semeion kai teraton*], through the power of the Spirit” (Andersen, 2020, pp. 11–12; Keener, 2013, p. 2123).⁶

The healings had a legitimizing function because of their extraordinary or miraculous character. Even if people at this time did not have the medical knowledge of our time, they had quite a good understanding of the normal course of many sicknesses. They did not expect blind people to see, deaf people to hear, and paralyzed people to walk, not to mention dead people to be raised. These events astonished them greatly. They understood such acts as divine miracles because what happened deviated dramatically from nature’s ordinary course. The healing of the crippled man in Lystra is one example. People there thought Zeus and Hermes had visited them until Paul and Barnabas corrected them (Acts 14: 8–19). The very fact that gods were referenced to explain the unexpected event shows that such events were not ordinary but required a supernatural explanation of some kind. In a Jewish context, the healing of a man born blind was considered utterly unexpected and unusual. “Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind”, the man himself stated (John 9:32).

This is the biblical perspective. The question is, however, to what extent can healings have a confirming or legitimizing function today, in our scientifically minded world? Let me at this point clarify my use of these central terms: The words “confirm” and “legitimize” are to be understood interchangeably, rooted in the use of the Greek verb *bebaioo* in Mark 16:20, as explained above. Thus, I use these terms in the sense of “substantiate” or “give confirming evidence”, which must be distinguished from “prove” in an absolute or final sense. The discussion within the philosophy of science about how to decide between different scientific theories sheds light on the limits of offering evidence. I will return to this issue later in the article.

⁶ See also 2 Cor. 12:12; cf. 1 Cor. 2:4–5 and Gal. 3:5.

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS OF MIRACLES

To illustrate the question of the confirming function of healing, let me provide an example of healing in a setting of prayer and worship from Candy Gunther Brown's study *Testing Prayer*. Brown (2012, pp. 135-136) describes the case of "Patty, then fifty-two years old, [who] was scheduled for surgery in 2010 to repair a dropped bladder and related urinary incontinence". She attended a meeting two months before her planned surgery. Patty tells that while singing worship songs, she "felt a hand pressing into my back and heat going through me. We went back to our seats and Randy [Clark] came out and was calling out words of knowledge⁷, he called out 'A BLADDER WILL BE LIFTED'..." (Brown, 2012, p. 135). Patty fell backwards and was overwhelmed with joy. From that day on, she no longer had any symptoms. She was later examined by her gynecologist, who confirmed that she was healed. No surgery was needed. According to Patty, he "was in shock, just kept shaking his head, he said he has NEVER seen this happen before" (Brown, 2012, p. 136). He told her that he would call the urologist who was supposed to perform the surgery to tell him, "this is unbelievable" (Brown, 2012, p. 136).

The gynecologist was obviously astonished and did not try to give any medical explanation of what had happened. In *Testing Prayer*, Brown (2012, pp. 138–139) includes copies of the medical documents from Patty's case, both before and after healing.⁸

Claims of divine healing, as in Patty's case, raise the question of the notion of miracles. It is a subject that has been debated extensively, also theologically. For many theologians, it has been important to understand miracles in a non-interventionist way – as not *contra naturam*. Wolfhart Pannenberg (2002) views miracles as a part of the natural order created by God, who can use natural laws also in extraordinary ways. Thus, Pannenberg understands miracles "as related to the subjectivity of our human experience of nature, especially to the limitations of our knowledge" (Pannenberg, 2002, p. 760).⁹ Unusual occurrences may follow other patterns of law that we do not know about. This applies also to the resurrection of Jesus, at least in principle, he argues (Pannenberg, 2002, p. 762). Thus, according to Pannenberg (2002), the reason we may look upon events as miraculous is epistemological.

However, for many of those theologians who emphasize a non-interventionist view of miracles, it has not been satisfactory to understand these acts as miracles or special divine acts for purely subjective or epistemological reasons. What has been called the Divine Action Project (DAP) has been suggested as a solution to this problem (Yong, 2010, p. 56). Commenting on this view, Amos Yong (2010, pp. 56–57) points out that what is looked for are "open spaces" where God can act without overruling natural processes. Chaos theory as well as quantum mechanics have been suggested as such "open spaces". Yong (2010), however, points out that these approaches have been met with a high degree of skepticism. Chaos theory is generally seen as deterministic, and a similar criticism has been forwarded concerning the use of quantum mechanics to find "open spaces". The question is also raised whether the view of this project may compromise God's transcendence (Yong, 2010, pp. 57–58).

Alvin Plantinga (2012) criticizes the idea that God cannot intervene in a world of natural laws, calling it a "hands-off theology". Plantinga (2012) distinguishes between the picture of classical science and the new picture of the science of quantum mechanics and chaos theory, for example. According to classical science, the world is like an enormous machine ruled by natural laws. According to non-interventionist thinking, God cannot act contrary to

⁷ A kind of prophetic message. See 1 Cor. 12:7–11.

⁸ Brown argues that "people's religious beliefs often have real-world effects that can be studied empirically". However, she states that she studies it from an "academic perspective". She does not assume "the existence or nonexistence of a deity or other suprahuman forces" (Brown, 2012, p. 7).

⁹ Pannenberg argues that he here follows Augustine's understanding of miracles.

these laws. “But why not? What is the problem?” Plantinga asks. According to classical science, the world is a closed system, but God is not a part of that system. God could create a particle or a horse *ex nihilo* without violating the laws of this system. It is a philosophical or metaphysical add-on to maintain no divine interference, he argues (Plantinga, 2012).

Moving on to the newer picture of quantum mechanics, Plantinga (2012) holds that these laws are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Miracles are not incompatible with them but are very improbable. The laws of this picture are “lower-level generalizations” on which we rely when we act in this world – when we bake bread and walk on the road but not on water, and so on. God intervenes when he causes an act that counters one of these generalizations. “But what is the problem?” Plantinga asks again. Are these lower-level regularities or generalizations like the laws of the Persians (which could not be changed), so that once God has established them, not even he can act contrary to them? There is nothing in classical science or in the newer science that contradicts divine intervention or miracles; there is no conflict. The objection to the idea of divine intervention is philosophical or theological, not scientific, Plantinga (2012) maintains.

In line with Plantinga (2012), I will argue that there is no problem in understanding miracles as divine interventions that cause acts contrary to “lower-level generalizations”. I will, however, add the following: How God performs miracles of different kinds is beyond our comprehension. The basic point is as follows: if *God* did not act – that is, intervene or interfere – in some special way, the miracles would not have happened. Thus, divine miracles do not happen on their own, simply through some kind of natural law or mechanism, even if it might be of an extremely rare kind. Special divine action is needed. As Keener puts it, “Science rightly shows what normally occurs; it does not address what God might cause for a special purpose in a special situation” (Keener, 2021, p. 13). Let us now turn to naturalistic rejections of the idea of divine miracles.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF MIRACULOUS HEALING CLAIMS

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume argues against the reality of miracles. He maintains that the laws of nature work without exceptions. Thus, a miracle “is a violation of the laws of nature” (Hume, 1975, p. 114). Consequently, Hume rejects all testimonies about miraculous events as false. No matter how seemingly credible testimonies of miracles may be, they are mistaken because miracles cannot happen.

However, as Keener rightly points out, Hume’s argument is circular because “Hume’s definitions assume what he claims to prove”, which is considered as “a standard fallacy” in logic (Keener, 2011, p. 134). Hume implies that his approach is inductive, in accordance with his empiricist tradition. On the contrary, however, he argues deductively because he has “a priori excluded disagreeable evidence” (Keener, 2011, p. 161). If Hume were to proceed inductively, he would have to show that each miracle claim being presented to him was false. However, even if he succeeded in doing so, the possibility of true miracle claims could not be ruled out because, as Keener states:

Hume could logically deny that any evidence for a miracle can be compelling only if he could a priori show that miracles are “logically impossible (that is, conceptually impossible, like a ‘square circle’ or a ‘married bachelor’)”; yet Hume does not do so. (Keener, 2011, p. 165)

Metaphysical naturalism, as for example Hume’s view, is a position based on metaphysical reasoning. In a dialogue with adherents of such a kind of naturalism, it can be underscored that theism is an alternative metaphysical view. More specifically, Christians can emphasize

that the alternative is the paradigm of the God of the Bible – the Creator who is able to work miracles beyond what is possible from a naturalistic point of view.

The understanding of natural laws has changed since Hume's time (cf. Plantinga's discussion above). Still, adherents of metaphysical naturalism typically argue that in the end there are only naturalistic explanations of what seem to be miracles. Faced with claims of miraculous healings, different natural explanations are given. As Keener (2011, p. 653) rightly underscores, it is always possible to suggest hypothetical explanations of what has happened. The question is, however, if the explanations offered are *plausible* or not. Let us look at some of the typical naturalistic hypotheses that are forwarded as alternatives to miracle claims.

Psychosomatic explanations

The most common kind of naturalistic explanation of claimed miraculous healings is probably psychosomatic explanations. Certainly, many healings can be explained by various psychosomatic factors. Research has been conducted widely on the relationship between the psychological and somatic aspects of humans, and the significance of this relationship is well documented, as the many studies of the placebo effect illustrate.

However, there are also many cases where such explanations are not credible. As Keener says, "When some clearly organic conditions have been cured... it seems reductionist to reduce all reports of healings to psychosomatic cures of functional limitations." (Keener, 2011, p. 642) He refers to numerous examples of "extranormal recoveries..., including healings of babies and the restoration of dead persons" that he recounts in his book. It would strain the limits of plausibility to explain such cases psychosomatically, he rightfully holds (Keener, 2011, pp. 645–646).

Misdiagnosis

Misdiagnosis is another explanation often used to refute claims of miraculous healings. Certainly, misdiagnoses occur. However, as Keener says, to "simply dismiss every cure as a case of prior misdiagnosis is to allow one's presupposition to determine the outcome", particularly "when it involves many cases and the prior diagnoses involve multiple physicians" (Keener, 2011, p. 661). To underscore this point, he refers to a healing evangelist who stated that if the critics were really convinced that so many claims of miraculous healing should be attributed to initial misdiagnosis "they should be raising an outcry against such widespread misdiagnosis" instead of criticizing divine healing (Keener, 2011, p. 661). If misdiagnosis was so frequent, Keener adds, we would have "a very incompetent medical industry meriting far more pervasive lawsuits" for malpractice. However, as he also points out, such an evaluation is just as wrong as the anti-supernaturalist position it was constructed to advocate (Keener, 2011, p. 667).

Keener (2011) illustrates his point through example: A woman had suffered from "severe epilepsy and a brain disturbance" from the age of six to twenty-six. After prayer for healing, "her EEG reading was normal" (Keener, 2011, p. 655). Her doctors, who could not believe the change, tested her twice during the following weeks. Finally, they concluded that she was well but rejected the idea of healing by prayer. Instead, they "concluded that she must have been misdiagnosed and mistreated for the past twenty years" (Keener, 2011, p. 655). Keener remarks that these "conscientious and competent doctors" preferred to risk "a possible malpractice suit rather than admit the possibility of divine healing" (Keener, 2011, p. 655).¹⁰

¹⁰ Keener (2011) refers to Ken Blue's *Authority to Heal* (1987, p. 58).

While misdiagnoses do occur, as Keener points out, sometimes such a verdict can “involve retroactive interpretation after eliminating supernatural activity or an anomaly as an option” (Keener, 2011, p. 1178).

Coincidence and spontaneous healing, etc.

In addition to psychosomatic factors and misdiagnosis, concepts such as coincidences, spontaneous healings, and remissions are also advanced as naturalistic explanations of miraculous claims. However, as Keener (2011, p. 646) emphasizes, faced with such explanations, “the cumulative factor” should be considered because “a specific coincidence appears increasingly less coincidental as its incidence level increases” because “the explanatory power of coincidence is not unlimited”. To someone who has observed “literally countless instances of healing following prayer”, it does not seem credible that all these cases could be attributed to psychological factors or coincidence (Keener, 2011, p. 646). A pattern forms that can be observed again and again: the healing occurs in a context of prayer – not always, yet rather frequently. On the other hand, when the context of prayer is lacking, these healings do not seem to happen.

To illustrate, Keener (2011, p. 687) refers to an example offered by Francis MacNutt. Once, MacNutt (1977, pp. 66-67) described to a group of doctors how “a tumor disappeared within an hour” after he had prayed. One of the doctors responded that it could not be proved that the prayer caused this. All that could be legitimately claimed was that prayer was made, and thereafter the tumour disappeared. This is true, MacNutt admits. However, he goes on to say that “It is only after you have seen such things happen frequently after prayer that you can offer some kind of inductive argument. The old adage here holds true: For the believer no argument is necessary; for the unbeliever no argument will prove sufficient” (MacNutt, 1977, p. 67).

Whenever an unexplained recovery occurs, it could simply be called a spontaneous healing or a remission without thereby being explained. If such terms are “overused to explain away any possible evidence”, the evidence is not treated as it should be (Keener, 2011, p. 656). To illustrate, Keener (2011, pp. 325-326) refers to a case reported to him by Tonye Briggs, who was at the time a medical student and is now a medical doctor, and who himself was an eyewitness to the healing of an ulcerated arm: “a deep wound about 10–15 cm wide closed overnight, after prayer, a day before the medical student’s arm was scheduled to be amputated”, Briggs describes. What remained was only “a small black spot” (Keener, 2011, p. 326). In this case, there should be no medical explanation, yet one of the doctors called it a “spontaneous healing” (Keener, 2011, p. 1178).¹¹

Such an approach of “classifying data to fit existing naturalistic paradigms inevitably obscures all potential evidence in conflict with the paradigm” (Keener, 2011, p. 673). It also causes another problem. If such extraordinary cases are just defined as “spontaneous healings” with no mention of prayer, “the next time such a healing occurs, others could cite the first case as an anomaly and note that such remissions have ‘happened on other occasions’” (Keener, 2011, pp. 673–674).

Even if an anomaly does not disprove a paradigm, it represents a challenge to it, and the higher the number of anomalies, the more the paradigm should be looked at critically (Kuhn, 1970a, pp. 90–91). Consequently, as Keener (2011) holds, the frequent occurrences of healing by prayer ought to challenge the naturalistic paradigm. He states: “Scholarship should not be reproached for appropriate caution, but it must also be open to a paradigm shift if

¹¹ Dr. Tonye Briggs, phone interviews, December 14, 16, 2009.

sufficient neglected evidence is brought to scholars' attention" (Keener, 2011, p. 694). He refers to Michael Polanyi, who points out that science normally initially ignores claims that contradict established consensus (Keener, 2011, p. 691).¹²

Christianity and metaphysical naturalism are alternative paradigms or worldviews. Arguably, there are parallels between such worldviews and scientific theories or paradigms regarding evaluating their truth claims (McGrath, 2020, p. 73). Below I will discuss this issue related to the legitimizing perspective of healing by referring to the positions of Alister McGrath (2020) and Thomas Kuhn (1970a). McGrath argues for the method of "inference to the best explanation", and Kuhn points to the priority of paradigms.

CLAIMS OF MIRACULOUS HEALINGS: METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM VERSUS CHRISTIANITY – A THEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Scientific interpretations

In science we seek to explain what is observed. However, as McGrath (2020) underscores, "observation is 'theory-laden'":

we see and interpret the world through pre-existing mental maps which are brought into play as we observe the world. We think we are seeing the world as it actually is, without realizing that we are actually looking at it – and making sense of it – through a kind of mental map that tells us what we are seeing. The process of *observation* is at the same time a process of *interpretation*. (McGrath, 2020, p. 87)

Therefore, McGrath (2020, p. 76) argues against what he calls "older positivist understandings of the scientific method". According to these understandings, "science is able to – and therefore ought to – offer evidentially and inferentially infallible evidence for its theories" (McGrath, p. 76). However, such a positivist approach is now considered to be "deeply problematic", he maintains. The reason is that scientific data can be interpreted in many different ways, and each of these can claim "some evidential support". Positivism, on the other hand, "tended to argue that there was a single unambiguous interpretation of the evidence, which any right-minded observer would discover" (McGrath, 2020, p. 76). McGrath (2020) argues instead for the method called "inference to the best explanation". This approach "recognizes that multiple explanations might be offered for any given set of observations and sets out to identify criteria by which the best such explanation might be identified and justified" (McGrath, 2020, p. 79).

According to McGrath's view of the method of "inference to the best explanation", we ask what theoretical framework or theory provides the best explanation of our

¹² Concerning healing by prayer, numerous randomized controlled studies of distant intercessory prayer have also been done. Some of these seem to confirm the effect of prayer, while others do not. However, as Candy G. Brown points out, such studies face serious methodological challenges. One issue is who the intercessors are. (For example, in one large-scale study, non-Christian intercessors were used). In addition, researchers cannot know whether those in the control group, who are not supposed to receive prayer, are prayed for after all, either by themselves or by someone else (Brown, 2012, pp. 78–95).

observations. The question is “what ‘big picture’ makes most sense out of” what is observed (McGrath, 2020, p. 97). Thus, McGrath’s approach is holistic.

McGrath (2020, pp. 60–65) advocates the position of critical realism, which recognizes that scientific knowledge is approximate; there is an objective reality, but science is on its way in understanding it. In line with this view, he points out that the “method of ‘inference to the best explanation’ may help us work out which of a group of possible explanations is the ‘best’ – but it does not follow that the ‘best’ of these explanations is actually true. It is simply better than its rivals” (McGrath, 2020, p. 80).

There are similarities between McGrath’s view of “inference to the best explanation” and Kuhn’s underscoring of “the priority of paradigms” (Kuhn, 1970a, pp. 43–51). A scientist, Kuhn argues, bases his research on a paradigm, which is shaped by the theory as well as by practice. Thus, for Kuhn, as well as for McGrath, different scientific theories or paradigms represent different interpretations of what is observed (Kuhn, 1970a, p. 198). Kuhn’s view of paradigms is holistic too. This is illustrated by how he underscores that the meaning of the terms is determined by the paradigm, as well as by his position on incommensurability (Kuhn, 1970a, pp. 198–204).¹³ Let us now turn to the question of what relevance such a view of scientific theories has for the understanding of the Christian paradigm and claims of miraculous healings.

Miraculous healings and the Christian paradigm

According to the approach of “inference to the best explanation”, as well as the Kuhnian view of paradigms, theories or paradigms must be looked at holistically. It is the theories’ total understanding of what is observed that must be considered. Likewise, I maintain that the Christian understanding of reality must be looked at holistically in its totality. Therefore, healings must be seen as a *part* of the larger picture of the Christian worldview – not separated from the rest of it. Thus, I argue that the most coherent explanation of healings, particularly extraordinary healings, is the Christian paradigm understood holistically.

Let me develop my argument further. The eschatological aspect as well as the legitimizing aspect of healing imply that preaching and healing belong together in an essential unity (Andersen, 2020, pp. 6–9). The miraculous healings occur in the context of the proclamation of the Gospel, the message of salvation in Christ. Further, salvation and creation belong together. The God who saves us is the God who created us and the world we live in – a message that in a profound way answers man’s existential questions – the quest for meaning and purpose. Simultaneously, Christianity also provides an intellectual foundation for its message. The natural world and its amazing order, illustrated for example by the so-called anthropic principle, testifies about its Creator. What we can observe in nature is in harmony with the biblical description of God, it can be argued.

The different aspects of Christianity – such as the created order, the existential answer, and miracles – have a cumulative force. These different aspects support each other mutually. This can be illustrated by a court case. The different pieces of evidence should not be evaluated in isolation from the rest of the evidence. All the evidential pieces should be viewed together, creating a total picture. Likewise, the different aspects of the Christian paradigm belong together as parts of the Christian worldview that offers a comprehensive explanation of our existence, as an alternative to metaphysical naturalism or other explanations of our world (Andersen, 2018, pp. 249–250, 259–260).

¹³ It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to discuss Kuhn’s thesis of incommensurability, regarding how it should be interpreted and how it should be evaluated.

This article focuses on the aspect of miraculous healings. According to the NT model, the proclamation of the Christian message should be accompanied by demonstrations or confirming signs, such as healings, which function as a confirmation of the truth of the message. Isolated miracles without a context would just be enigmatic (Craig, 2008, p. 266).¹⁴ Related to the preaching of the Gospel, the sick are ministered to in the name of Jesus, and healings are expected to occur. Here the miraculous healings serve a kerygmatic purpose. Particularly extraordinary healings, for which no plausible medical explanation can be given, confirm the truth of the Gospel and challenge the naturalistic paradigm.

However, as McGrath (2020, p. 80) points out, the approach of “inference to the best explanation” may lead us to the best theory of a group, but not necessarily to the true theory. This is a challenge regarding scientific theories or paradigms, and a challenge on an even deeper level when it comes to choosing between metaphysical paradigms such as naturalism and Christianity.

The so-called “God-of-the-gaps” problem is related to this issue. In his discussion of miracles, Keener brings up this question. It can be argued that even if at present, there are no naturalistic explanations of an extraordinary healing, “a purely naturalistic explanation” may one day emerge. Keener (2011, p. 187), however, holds that such an approach posits “something like a naturalism-of-the-gaps explanation (a naturalistic interpretation that *awaits* further discovery)”. It implies that the burden of proof is on the theistic position. Such reasoning is “not neutral”; it presupposes that “theism is a philosophically illegitimate explanation”, he maintains (Keener, 2011, p. 187). It is “a logical fallacy” to contend that “because explanations based on special divine action have sometimes been rightly displaced... all supernatural explanations ought to be displaced” (Keener, 2011, p. 702). Such reasoning implies “generalizing based on particular cases”, he argues (Keener, 2011, p. 702).

Keener’s (2011) argument seems to me to be valid. Let us, however, for the sake of the discussion, ask: If purely natural explanations were found even for the most extraordinary healings, would that disprove Christianity? No, I would argue. If this were the case, the other aspects of the Christian paradigm would still be valid. Additionally, concerning miracles, Pannenberg’s (2002) understanding for example, described above, could be a possible alternative Christian approach. From his perspective, Pannenberg also sees “unusual occurrences as ‘signs’ of God’s special activity in creation” (Pannenberg, 2002, p. 759). Yong (2010, p. 61), arguing from a Pentecostal position, advocates an eschatological understanding, seeing “God’s future” as “already intersected with our ‘present’ in Christ and the Holy Spirit”. However, divine action can only be identified “retrospectively, in faith” (Yong, 2010, p. 61), as we are “informed by the biblical narrative, in anticipation of the kingdom to come” (Yong, 2010, p. 63). Such a “theological account” does not detract “from scientific insights provided at their appropriate levels of explanation” (Yong, 2010, p. 61). What must be avoided is “reductionistic and totalizing views”, he maintains (Yong, 2010, p. 61). At the same time, he encourages Pentecostals not to “abandon interventionist language”, but to understand it theologically (Yong, 2010, p. 64).

To what extent one agrees with these statements by Yong depends on their interpretation, I will say. Certainly, healings, including the most extraordinary ones, are seen as special divine acts as interpreted through the eyes of the Christian paradigm. Furthermore, surely, scientific research on healing by prayer can and should be done. I will, however, argue that it is far too defensive to take for granted that purely naturalistic explanations can be found for all extraordinary healings. This would be a hypothetical statement – a statement of faith. As Keener (2011) points out, it would be a “naturalism-of-the-gaps” approach, which seems to

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of NT texts regarding this question, see Andersen (2020).

me wrong in light of the numerous extraordinary healings that occur. Keener rightfully argues that there are healings that cannot be explained by purely natural mechanisms. Such extraordinary healings represent anomalies for metaphysical naturalism, thus challenging this paradigm. As pointed out above, naturalistic explanations can always be forwarded, but the question is whether they are *plausible*. They may be so in some cases, but often the opposite seems to be true. Referring to psychosomatic mechanisms or explanations as misdiagnoses, remissions, or spontaneous healings often seems to be ways of evading the questions represented by extraordinary healings. The frequency of such anomalies related to the naturalistic paradigm challenges it – and should result in its serious re-evaluation, I hold – all the more so since the healings in question are a part of an observable pattern of Christian preaching and healing prayer.

Even so, why there are so relatively few healings after prayer is a question that may be asked. There is an ongoing theological discussion concerning this issue. Basically, the answer is that we live in a situation of *already – and not yet*; the kingdom of God is present, but not yet in its fullness (Ladd, 1974, pp. 63–69). Therefore, we see God’s healing power manifested only partially. Related to this “already – and not yet situation”, it must also be pointed out that the Church, which consists of human beings, is in no way perfect in the area of healing, as in many other areas; it is its challenge to grow as a channel of God’s healing power. Yet it is also true that a pattern is emerging: After prayer for the sick, healing often follows. There are numerous examples of churches worldwide where ministering to the sick by prayer is emphasized in preaching and practice and where healings are seen frequently (Brown, 2012, pp. 21–63).¹⁵

In addition to these theological and philosophical considerations, we must also remember, as Kuhn points out, that theory choice is not only an issue of theoretical and logical considerations; moral and “social-psychological” factors also bear upon paradigm choice (Kuhn, 1970b, p. 22). Karl Popper (1970, p. 57-58) objects to this, maintaining that logic is the basis for theory choice, not psychology or sociology. Kuhn (1970c), however, answers that more than logic is needed to choose between theories. There is a difference between theory choice and the reasoning of deductive logic and mathematics, he argues. In deductive logic for example, if you agree about the premises and the rules that are applied, then you are forced to agree. But when different theories or paradigms are evaluated, the situation is different. Here various factors in addition to logic, such as sociological ones, come into the picture (Kuhn, 1970c, pp. 237–238, 260–261).

In his challenge of naturalism, Keener (2011) also brings up the sociological aspect. He admits that faith communities may have a controlling function, but he points out that this is similar in academic circles too. He holds that “academic skepticism” also can “be a controlling and even coercive bias. This bias can include hostility toward faith perspectives, a demand for conformity with dominant academic beliefs” (Keener, 2011, p. 688). Probably this is so particularly in Western culture where secularism and naturalism have such a strong footing, but there may be such a tendency in academic circles generally because of the influence of the Western academic mentality. According to Brown, there are many examples of how empirical effects related to prayer for healing have been neglected because of academic prejudice, instead of becoming an object for research (Brown, 2012, pp. 94–95). The Church here faces a cultural challenge.

Viewed philosophically, Christianity and metaphysical naturalism are alternative paradigms or worldviews that cannot be finally proved. However, from a biblical perspective, we can emphasize that God has *revealed* himself and the truth about our existence to us. If not, we

¹⁵ See also Andersen (2020, pp. 18–20), where I reflect more on the implications of the NT’s underscoring of healing and the challenge the Church faces here.

humans would have stumbled around in darkness. Now we can follow the light of God instead. From the perspective of the biblical paradigm, healings are signs confirming the truth of the kingdom of God that has already come – and is yet to come in its fullness. Such healings may be of different kinds. Some of them may be explained as results of natural mechanisms. Even so, these healings can, from a Christian perspective, be seen as answers to prayer. How God heals is beyond our comprehension regardless of whether God heals by using natural mechanisms or by intervening in a more direct way.

Healings, when personally experienced or shared through testimonies, can play a significant role in confirming Christians' faith. For non-Christians too, healings, particularly extraordinary ones, are a confirmative – or challenging – sign, speaking about the truth of the Gospel. Healings can function so in various manners, for example as a wake-up call, by raising questions about our existence or simply by confirming the message being preached and thus they play a role – even a decisive role – in leading people to faith in Jesus Christ. There are numerous examples of this (Andersen, 2020, p. 20; Brown, 2011).

Therefore, the Church should with confidence put emphasis on its healing ministry (Andersen, 2020, pp. 18–20). Healings as miraculous *signs* point to a reality beyond the material world, beyond the merely human world, offering a glimpse of the reality of him who created us and came to save us. Just as snowdrop flowers are a sign of the spring as well as a confirmation of the spring's arrival, so too are miraculous healings a sign as well as a confirmation of the presence of God's kingdom, challenging the denial of God and confirming faith in him. According to the biblical model, healing and preaching should flow together in an essential unity, manifesting and confirming the presence of the kingdom of God.

Regarding this task, the Church must put its trust in the Lord, so that his word is confirmed by the signs that accompany it (Mark 16:20). Here the Church is utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit, the one who convicts through the Word and who also works the miracles that confirm the truth of the Word (John 16:7–8; Rom. 15:18–19).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to the NT, the preaching of the Gospel should be followed by miraculous healings, confirming its message. Today's medical science, however, raises the question of to what extent even extraordinary healings – claimed to be miraculous – can be explained by purely natural mechanisms instead of by special divine action. According to metaphysical naturalism, only the natural world exists, and consequently, divine miracles are ruled out a priori. However, the naturalistic paradigm is challenged by a pattern of numerous cases of extraordinary healings related to prayer that seem to defy medical explanations. Hypotheses of natural explanations can always be presented, but the question is whether they are plausible. Often, such hypotheses seem to be a way of trying to evade the challenge such extraordinary healings represent.

There are parallels between theory choice in science and the choice between metaphysical paradigms such as naturalism and Christianity. Among philosophers of science, there is a growing consensus that different scientific theories represent different interpretations of what is observed. Therefore, when alternative theories are evaluated, they need to be viewed holistically. One method of doing this, called "inference to the best explanation", asks which of a group of paradigms makes the most sense of what is observed. Likewise, faced with the choice between naturalism versus Christianity, a similar approach is recommended. I maintain that the Christian paradigm presents a total picture of reality, offering the best explanation of our world. Miraculous healings are an important part of this paradigm. Thus, it can be argued that Christian theology gives us the best and most coherent explanation of healing by prayer.

In accordance with the NT model, miraculous healings play a significant role in confirming, in legitimizing, the truth of the Gospel being preached, I conclude. Therefore, the Church should with confidence seek to fulfil its healing ministry, asking for the empowering of the Holy Spirit for this task.

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