

**PETER MAY**

## **Miracles in Medicine<sup>1</sup>**

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This is a sensitive subject. We live in a culture where feelings and facts become deeply interwoven. Relative truth, post-truth, truthiness and alternative facts have become emblems of our day and generation. People can get very upset and discouraged when their personally held convictions come under critical scrutiny. This is particularly so if they have based their faith on a healing ‘miracle’ in their family, which has become for them the persuasive argument that led them to Christ. So I want at the outset to say that Christians have a particular calling to separate feelings from facts and that this has been for me a personal – and necessary – journey.

When I was fifteen, I found myself waking each morning with worsening headaches. When vomiting and double vision set in, I was admitted to Guy’s Hospital, where in 1961 (the dates are quite important in ‘miracle’ stories as diagnostic technologies are constantly improving), they did an air encephalogram which showed a space-occupying lesion, consistent with a brain tumour. My father broke the news to me. He said it was either benign or malignant, and if the latter, the outlook was very poor. You can imagine the impact this had on me, on my family and on all our friends.

On the day of the operation, my father, who was not a churchgoer, found a church in central London near his office and went in to pray. It was an overcast day and the church was empty, dark and silent. He later took me back to show me the scene. Emotionally distraught, he had sat in a pew, closed his eyes and done his very best to pray. Eventually he lifted his head and opened his eyes. At that moment, he said, two things happened simultaneously. The sun came out, flooding the chancel with coloured light through the stained glass windows. But more remarkably, believing himself to be utterly alone, he was amazed when the organ started playing at full volume. Moved by this flood of light and sound, he returned to his office with new hope, believing that God had given him a sign that he would answer his prayers.

An hour or so later, he had a phone call at work from the surgeon, who was still in his theatre gown but felt compelled to phone him at once, reporting that, much to his surprise, he had found only a subdural haematoma, which he had drained successfully and that he now anticipated a complete recovery.

Family and friends saw this as a miraculous answer to their prayers. No

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the Christians in Science Conference held on Saturday 22 October 2016 at the King’s Centre, Osney Mead, Oxford.

one had expected it. But as I went on to study 'A Level' sciences, I had to ask myself, with all due respect to Guy's Hospital, whether it was really a miracle for a Guy's surgeon to make a wrong diagnosis.

### **The dangers of miracle claims**

Some years later at medical school, I heard a surgeon saying that he was seeing patients with breast cancer arriving at his clinic too late to be cured, because they had wasted time searching for a miracle. I thought this was tragic – and enormously damaging to Christian credibility.

Later I would discover other problems: the dangers of patients stopping vital treatments, of people blaming themselves for their lack of faith when they weren't healed; the financial cost to the patient, (I think of one man, a headmaster, who went all the way to Nigeria to find a particularly 'gifted' healer); the profit made by the healer, (I think of the American healer who could afford to bring his whole team across the Atlantic on Concorde), and the abuse of the vulnerable – the elderly, the simple minded, the poor and most of all the children. All of these have made the pursuit of 'spiritual healing' a very mixed blessing.

I therefore set out to investigate whether there was any evidence of miracle healings occurring today. This is not the sort of research project that lends itself to randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials. I could however investigate the best and most compelling claims and see what they showed. These tended to be flagged up in media reports or written about in books, where usually the best case was kept for the final chapter. When it came to professional healers or healing organisations, I learned to ask them for their three best cases, as a single case could just be a bad example, but 'three best cases', which they had chosen themselves, should give a real idea of what was going on.

### **What is a healing miracle?**

In order to do this, I had to satisfy myself as to what a miracle might look like, if I ever found one. Now definitions are problematic. Dr Brian D. Rekus, who has recently written on this subject, defines a miracle as 'a supernatural intervention by a supernatural agent to alter an otherwise natural course of events',<sup>2</sup> while Dr Rex Gardner defined a miracle as 'the healing of organic disease by means or at a speed inexplicable medically and preceded by prayer'.<sup>3</sup> But sick people and their relatives often pray and doctors are often surprised by inexplicable and unexpected medical

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2 Rekus, B.D. 'Derren Brown wants to see objective evidence for miracles? Challenge accepted', Premier Christianity blog, 10 October 2016.

3 Gardner, R. *Healing Miracles*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd (1986), p.1.

outcomes. Definitions are therefore fraught with problems but descriptions seemed to offer a much better way forward.

In 1735 Cardinal Lambertini, who went on to become Pope Benedict XIV, listed five criteria for healing miracles.<sup>4</sup> Miracles in the Gospels, he observed, generally shared these five features:

1. the illness was **incurable** (such as congenital blindness, kyphosis of the spine, a wasted arm, paralysed legs or death of four days duration);
2. the conditions were generally **non-remitting**, (exceptions to this would be epilepsy and menorrhagia). Most could not resolve spontaneously;
3. the healing was **instantaneous**, usually at a word of command. Two Gospel examples have very short delays before completion; otherwise they are all reported as happening ‘immediately’;
4. there was **no other therapy** to account for the recovery. Saliva and mud on the eyes would not in itself be therapeutic;
5. the healing was **complete**. The deaf man did not have to cup his hand around his ear and say, ‘Could you speak up?’ nor did the paralysed man, as far as we are told, limp away, leaning on the arm of a friend, needing someone else to carry his bed.

So, if people are claiming to see ‘Christlike’ miracles today, and that is generally what they imply by using the word ‘miracle’ – indeed, what other miracle workers might they have in mind? – we do need to test their claims against these five criteria.

In contrast, curable diseases that are liable to get better on their own, that may gradually improve over weeks or months, that have already received effective treatment or that have only partially recovered, are thereby disqualified from consideration. They might constitute unexpected and quite remarkable answers to prayer, for which we might enthusiastically thank God, as with the healing of my subdural haematoma, but they are not Christlike miracles. I did not, for instance, have a malignant brain tumour, which suddenly disappeared.

As noted under 2) and 3) above, not all Christ’s healing miracles fully met all five criteria, but these exceptions seem to be of little importance. When diseases do spontaneously remit, they rarely do so suddenly.

There were other very different miracles Christ is reported to have done, some of which have been strangely overlooked by would-be miracle

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<sup>4</sup> Lambertini served as Devil’s Advocate for the Canonisation of Saints from 1708 to 1728 before becoming Pope; Dr St John Dowling discussed the Lambertini criteria in ‘ Lourdes cures and their medical assessment’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (1984), 634-638.

workers today. Feeding multitudes and stilling storms would be of particular interest in the twenty-first century. There is also plenty of scope for restored amputations and miraculous cures of obesity or dementia, and endless scope for resurrections of the dead.

### Did Christ perform miracles?

While we can investigate contemporary miracle claims, we cannot scientifically investigate miracles which occurred before the age of science. If we believe that Christ performed miracles, it is not because of the scientific evidence. Rather, it is because they constitute an important part of a consistent story. Rule out Christ's miracles and you would logically need to rule out the teaching that accompanied them. The fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies (which are open to investigation), Christ's beautiful character (surely 'the light of the world'), his noble teaching (found attractive today in every culture), his extraordinary claims about himself (both implicit and explicit), the miraculous signs that he is reported to have performed in all the Gospel sources and the historical data surrounding the resurrection<sup>5</sup> are the warp and weft of the New Testament story. They cannot be teased apart and have to be weighed together in the scales of probability. If Jesus has been 'declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead,'<sup>6</sup> we should not be surprised to hear reports of his miracles. Such is the uniqueness of Christ. 'If I drive out demons by the finger of God,' said Jesus, 'then the kingdom of God has come to you.'<sup>7</sup>

### Earlier investigations

I am not the first doctor to address these questions. In 1910, a series of papers on faith healing were published in the *British Medical Journal*. In 1956, the BMA published a report<sup>8</sup> in response to a series of questions posed by the *Archbishops' Commission on Divine Healing*. The BMA enquiries were based on a well-advertised questionnaire, which was sent to many doctors and interested organisations. Their report concluded, 'We find that, whilst patients suffering from psychogenic disorders may be "cured" by various methods of spiritual healing...we can find no evidence that organic diseases are cured solely by such means.' The Archbishops' Commission, which itself reported two years later, stated that 'no actual authenticated case of extraordinary and medically inexplicable healing had been brought to the Committee's notice'. Also in 1956 Vincent Edmunds and Gordon Scorer, leading members of the Christian Medical Fellowship

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5 May, P. 'The resurrection of Jesus and the witness of Paul', [www.bethinking.org](http://www.bethinking.org) .

6 Romans 1:4.

7 Luke 11:20.

8 'Divine healing and co-operation between doctors and clergy', BMA Publications (1956).

(CMF), reported on a medical study group, which had been chaired by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, with Dr Douglas Johnson acting as secretary.<sup>9</sup> They and others such as Verna Wright<sup>10</sup> all wrote carefully and clearly on this subject. Thirty years later, in a more flamboyant style, American magician James Randi wrote a devastating exposé of faith healers in the USA.<sup>11</sup> Carl Sagan in his preface to the book wrote, 'We may disagree with Randi on specific points, but we ignore him at our peril.'

I wrote up my first investigation of miracle claims over forty years ago,<sup>12</sup> and have engaged in public discussion on this subject subsequently.<sup>13</sup> In particular, I have been able to discuss my findings over the years with my medical partners and also members of the CMF, including those who have had medical missionary experience across the world.

### Morris Cerullo

In 1992 I was invited to take part in an ITN News interview with American TV faith healer Morris Cerullo. The subject was national news because he had put up posters all over London, implying the blind would see, the deaf would hear and the lame would walk.

When eventually I got a word in edgeways, I asked him to produce his three best cases from the week and put them forward for public scrutiny. In the event, and after a great deal of delay and obfuscation on his part, he offered seven cases, which were then examined by Joan Bakewell's BBC *Heart of the Matter* team, for which I acted as a medical adviser. The programme, which revealed our findings, was seen by 4.7 million people, which I was told was the highest viewing figure recorded for that successful series.<sup>14</sup> There was a lot of public interest in this matter.

What did we find? A woman healed of low back pain was taken back to her orthopaedic surgeon, who demonstrated there was no change in her X-rays, but her depression had lifted and she was more mobile. A second woman had back pain which subsequently recurred. A woman anxious that she had a recurrence of a melanoma, actually had a small inflamed cyst which had burst and healed itself. A small child had his spectacles taken from him because his parents were told he had been healed. His sight was retested and the child had his spectacles returned to him. A

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9 Edmunds, V. & Scorer, G. *Some thoughts on Faith Healing*, CMF (1st edn. 1956, extensively revised 3rd edn. 1979).

10 Wright, V. 'Health and Healing', CMF Guidelines no.98.

11 Randi, J. *The Faith Healers*, Prometheus Books (1987).

12 May, P. 'Talking Point', *Life of Faith*, 6 Nov 1976.

13 May, P. 'Signs, wonders and healing', in Goldingay, J. (ed.) *When Christians Disagree* series, Leicester: IVP (1989); May, P. 'Claimed contemporary miracles', *Medico-Legal Journal* (2003) Vol.71 Pt 4, 144-158.

14 BBC TV, *Heart of the Matter*, 16 August 1992.

twenty-six year old woman had knee pain; a surgeon reassured her there was nothing significantly wrong and her pain settled with physiotherapy. A woman believed she was healed of a fibroid, which she never actually had.

Not offered in Cerullo's list was Natalia Barsed, a four year old girl with metastatic Neuroblastoma. She had been made to run up and down the stage in tears to demonstrate that she was healed. She died of her disease just two months later. A twenty-five year old woman called Audrey Reynolds stopped her epilepsy medication and had a fit in the bath six days later and drowned. The coroner, Sir Montague Levine stated, 'It is a tragedy she went to this meeting and thought she had been cured of everything. Sadly, it led to her death.'<sup>15</sup>

The BBC enquiry led to a wider investigation within Cerullo's organisation and I wrote a detailed report on it all, which was published in America.<sup>16</sup> They had nothing of consequence to show from it.

### Other public investigations

Jennifer Rees Larcombe published a book entitled *Unexpected Healing* in which she claimed to have been miraculously healed of recurrent attacks of encephalitis, an inflammatory condition of her nervous system.<sup>17</sup> A year previously, a photograph of her holding a wheelchair above her head had appeared on the front cover of a magazine.<sup>18</sup> She subsequently appeared on television. I found an opportunity to meet her with a neurologist. He could make no sense of her story, and she eventually gave us signed consent to see her medical case notes. However, she promptly briefed her GP not to send them to us. Knowing that her manuscript was with her publishers, I alerted them to my concerns. They replied, 'We are all aware of the importance of including accurate medical information, and this is high on our agenda of priorities for the book.' A year later, I resubmitted her signed consent form to her doctor and he then sent me her neurological medical papers. She had shown no clinical signs and her extensive neurological tests, including lumbar puncture, EEG, CT and MRI scans were all normal. My detailed report in the form of a book review was published in the Church of England Newspaper and caused a furore.<sup>19</sup>

German healer Reinhard Bonnke made dramatic claims on a video about a Mrs Jean Neil, who was said to be healed of multiple pathologies.

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15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RtfG6dNSO8> (Viewed 21 April 2017).

16 May, P. 'The faith healing claims of Morris Cerullo', *Free Inquiry* Vol 14, no 1, (Winter 93/94); copies available from author.

17 Larcombe, J. *Unexpected Healing*, Hodder & Stoughton (1991).

18 *Renewal Magazine*, No.173, October 1990.

19 May, P. 'Unexpected Healing, Book Review', *Church of England Newspaper*, 29 November 1991, p13.

These claims collapsed hopelessly when I investigated them.<sup>20</sup>

Dr Rex Gardner collected twenty-two cases he had gathered from around the world, which he published in a book called *Healing Miracles*,<sup>21</sup> which he dedicated to 'To my fellow members of the Christian Medical Fellowship', a number of whom have been eager to discuss it with me. The book gained popularity and credibility due to a summary of his findings being published in the *British Medical Journal*. However, this was not a peer-reviewed research paper but an interesting article for the Christmas 'coffee-table' edition of the *BMJ*.<sup>22</sup> He also presented these claims on television. His best case was a spontaneous recovery from nerve deafness in a child, a phenomenon I had never come across before, but when I asked an ENT surgeon whether such things ever happen, he immediately supplied me with a paper he had written on the subject<sup>23</sup> and later invited me to attend an ENT Conference on the phenomenon.

It seems that such things happen only occasionally and are not well understood, though I have since come across a similar case in Southampton. None of the other cases in Dr Gardner's book were anything like as interesting and two of his cases had died of their diseases in the year the book was published.

I have a filing-cabinet filled with correspondence on such miracle claims – so I am only able to present the headlines here, as examples of my research. I am grateful to the journalist who studied my papers but then berated me for not having investigated the miracles of Lourdes. So I made arrangements to visit the south of France, where I met Dr Theodore Mangiapan, who had been the Clinical Director of Lourdes for eighteen years. I took an interpreter with me and we met at his home in Marseilles and had a long discussion.

### The miracles of Lourdes

To date, there have been sixty-nine official claims of miracles from Lourdes, from the millions of sick people who go there in search of a cure. The reason why my subdural haematoma was misdiagnosed in 1960 was because of the very limited diagnostic tools available then. Only since the 1970s, have CT scans and since 1980 MRI scans come into general use. Today we have a wealth of technology to help us make accurate diagnoses. Therefore it is not surprising that, after many miracle claims prior to 1960

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20 May, P. 'Something to shout about – the documentation of a miracle', *Skeptical Magazine*, Manchester, October 1991.

21 Gardner, R. *A Doctor Investigates Healing Miracles*, Darton, Longman & Todd (1986).

22 Gardner, R. 'Miracles of healing', *BMJ* Christmas edn. (1983).

23 Bailey, C.M. et al, 'Recovery from Prolonged Sensorineural Hearing Loss', *American Journal of Otology* vol. 4, no1, July 1982.

with around fifty claims being made on average each year, in the past fifty years only seven claims have been accepted as miracles by the International Medical Bureau of Lourdes.

They include, from 1963, the claim of Vittorio Michelli, (Lourdes' miracle no. 63). He had a spontaneous remission of a bone cancer in his hip, which took place very gradually, leaving him with a displaced hip joint, so that he walked with a severe limp.

In 1970, Serge Perrin, (no.64) was thought to have had a stroke but his physical signs and symptoms never matched up. Crucial tests were normal and he displayed what psychiatrists call 'la belle indifference'. It is a characteristic of hysterics that they are strangely at ease with their ill-health. Dr Mangiapan seemed reluctant to discuss him.

In 1987, Jean-Pierre Bely (no. 66) was believed to have Multiple Sclerosis, but the one person on the medical committee who voted against his healing being miraculous was the neurologist. He did not feel the diagnosis had been established beyond significant doubt. Today, MRI scans are crucial in making that difficult diagnosis.

The healing in 1964 of Anna Santaniello from Rheumatic Heart Disease (no. 67) was not announced until fifty years after the event. Most recently, in 2011, Serge Francois regained 'functional' mobility of his left leg, which was deemed inexplicable.

I asked Dr Mangiapan, who has written the definitive book on the healings of Lourdes,<sup>24</sup> which he thought was the most impressive miracle of them all. He selected case number 65. Delizia Cirolli was a twelve year old Sicilian girl, whose photograph featured on the front cover of his book. She had a tumour in her knee, which was diagnosed as a neuroblastoma, but her parents refused to allow amputation, which would have been the only possible medical cure. So she went back home from Lourdes as if to die, but six months later got up off her sick bed, began to walk and never looked back. I asked him when she was next X-rayed, and he said it was about six months after her recovery. 'Was it healed then?' 'No', he said but it was gradually resolving. Neither did it recover completely; she subsequently needed orthopaedic surgery to straighten her deformed leg. I pointed out to him that neuroblastomas of all childhood cancers have the highest rate of spontaneous remission. But he disputed the diagnosis, and believed it to be a Ewing's Sarcoma for which he did not believe a single case of spontaneous remission had ever been reported.

Some months later, I was interviewed for a Channel Four Equinox documentary on the miracles of Lourdes. I told them that Delizia Cirolli was the key case and said that they should try to get hold of the histological

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24 Mangiapan, T. *Les Guerisons de Lourdes*, Lourdes (1994).

slides from this girl's tumour biopsy and bring them to a London oncologist for a further opinion. They managed to do this and presented them to Dr Kathy Pritchard-Jones, a Consultant Paediatric Oncologist at the Royal Marsden Hospital. I had to wait to the end of their film to hear her verdict. She reported that the tissue was completely undifferentiated, leading her to conclude that this could have been a bone infection such as tuberculosis, rather than a tumour, which had eventually resolved itself spontaneously.<sup>25</sup>

### The Vatican Miracles

Independent of Lourdes, the Vatican traditionally has required two miracles for beatification and two more for canonisation in the making of a saint. Reforms in 1983 reduced the requirement to two miracles. At least one is now required before beatification and a second for canonisation. A Canadian haematologist, Jacalyn Duffin, went on study leave to the Vatican to research these cases. She identified 1,400 miracles from 1588 to 1999. However she was not allowed to see any medical papers subsequent to 1939, as these files are locked away in the secret Vatican archives. One has to ask why that should be and what truths were being concealed. This rendered her book a very vague discussion of endless uncertainties.<sup>26</sup> Pre-war diagnostics were certainly not a precise science.

So I was intrigued when Pope Benedict XVI came to Britain in 2010 to beatify Cardinal Henry Newman, the first stage towards making him a saint. Knowing that Newman had been based in Birmingham, I phoned the Birmingham Oratory and asked if they had a copy of the *Positio*, the Vatican medical history of the case, and if so, could I visit the Oratory and have permission to see it? A very kind gentleman took my call and offered to send me a spare copy. So to my great surprise and delight, I was able to purchase a copy of the Vatican documents concerning the miracle required for the beatification of Cardinal Henry Newman.<sup>27</sup>

The patient, Deacon Jack Sullivan, who had prayed to Cardinal Newman, gave a two year history of back and leg pain, which was due to degenerative lumbar disc disease, causing severe central compression of his spinal cord at lumbar disc level 3/4. On 9 August 2001, he underwent a routine, surgical, decompressive L3-L5 laminectomy with excision of the protruding disc. His only complication was a dural leak of CSF fluid during the operation, which was promptly repaired. This was followed by 'an

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25 'Equinox, The Miracle Police', Channel Four, shown 28 July 1998.

26 Duffin, J. *Medical Miracles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009).

27 'Positio Super Miro, Ioannis Henrici Newman', Congregatio De Causis Sanctorum, Roma (2008).

unremarkable post-operative course',<sup>28</sup> He was discharged home pain-free on 15 August 2001.

### The Houghton Enquiry

In 1992, Sir John Houghton had set up an enquiry of over thirty doctors, pastors, healers, ethicists and theologians including two bishops, to examine the issues of cure and care in Christian healing. Papers were circulated in advance. The consultation met four times over the next three years. It was in this context that I was pressed to report on all the cases put forward in Rex Gardner's book and my notes are available to be evaluated by anyone who is interested.<sup>29</sup>

Various cases were presented to the Houghton enquiry but no case of miraculous healing could be substantiated by medical evidence. The diabetics still had sugar in their urine; the cancers had not been eradicated; and a strawberry naevus which should have faded quite naturally within a couple of years, was still visible after twelve years.

Michael Poole presented 'Helen's story' at that time, which he described in his book *Miracles*.<sup>30</sup> 'Helen' is a pseudonym. The fact that her story of healing continues to be raised after thirty-five years highlights to my mind the lack of better stories. Helen claimed to have been miraculously healed of Multiple Sclerosis in answer to specific prayer for healing.

I suspected initially on reading Michael's published account that the diagnosis might possibly have been made by the patient herself. The book implied it was made by the GP but the GP was quoted only as referring ambiguously to 'her condition', and not overtly conceding the diagnosis. I wondered if he had doubts about it as, for some reason it was disbelieved by her father. The difficult diagnosis of MS is generally left to specialists. A complicating factor was that Helen had also suffered significant emotional problems. She had a history of post-natal depression and 'extreme anxiety'. She twice attempted suicide and admitted to attention-seeking behaviour.<sup>31</sup>

It can be very difficult even for a specialist to diagnose MS in its early stages, and without MRI scans, diagnosis is liable to be highly speculative. Given the frequency of spontaneous remissions in this disease, it was never my clinical practice to rush into investigations, or even admit my fears of this untreatable disease to the patient, until the condition was significantly established and disabling. A tentative diagnosis of MS would

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28 May, P. 'Beatification of Cardinal Henry Newman', *Medico-Legal Journal*, 28 April 2017.

29 May, P. 'An open letter to Dr Rex Gardner', 5 Dec 1994.

30 Poole, M. *Miracles: Science, The Bible & Experience*, Scripture Union (1992), pp.7- 14.

31 *ibid* p.9.

be a lifelong burden for the patient to bear, affecting major life decisions, when that disease in its natural course might completely remit.

However, Michael Poole has now obtained crucial medical papers regarding this case. Helen was in fact admitted to the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases at Queen Square in London in 1973. She had had both signs and symptoms, which were judged to be consistent with the early stages of Multiple Sclerosis, though by the time of her admission 'these symptoms had very largely resolved'. The uncertain conclusion reached by the UK's leading neurological centre, prior to the availability of MRI scans, was that 'the probability that these represent episodes of demyelination is very strong... We told her that this (diagnosis) was possible but pointed out to her the relatively benign course over a good number of years.' These symptoms had at that stage been intermittent over the previous fifteen years. Eight years later, her symptoms, whether physical and/or psychological, are reported to have resolved permanently after prayer for healing.

Michael Poole has asked me to specifically record, 'On the afternoon of 10 January 1981, her symptoms are reported to have resolved dramatically and permanently after specific prayer for healing.' But I am not disputing that her prayers were answered. The issue for me is whether her recovery from this illness fulfilled the criteria of being a Christlike miracle. In this case it was a presumed diagnosis of a relapsing condition, which was never verified by MRI scan, in a patient who had experienced significant emotional illness. The symptoms attributed to MS had all but vanished when she was admitted to hospital and could be accounted for by psychological overlay. Any Christian would give praise and thanksgiving to God for such a merciful answer to their prayers, for Multiple Sclerosis, if that is what it was, can develop into a truly devastating disease, if it does not remit.

Since 1990, everyone in the UK has the right of access to their medical records and can request copies of hospital letters, consultant opinions and reports of investigations.<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to Michael Poole for pressing for such documentation in this case. Miracle claims in my view should not be published nowadays without authoritative, scientific evidence.

### **Dr Mary Self**

More recently, in 2001, Dr Mary Self published her story,<sup>33</sup> which certainly appears to be a remarkable answer to her anxious prayers in what was an agonising situation. She feared that a lesion shown on a scan of her pelvis was a metastasis from a previous bone cancer, which had required the amputation of her leg. But the biopsy was inconclusive and over the next few

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<sup>32</sup> Access to Health Records Act 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Self, M. *From Medicine to Miracle: How My Faith Overcame Cancer*, Harper Collins (2001).

months the lesion gradually reduced in size and disappeared. Her consultant wrote, 'She is saying it is a miracle. I am saying it is unexplained. It is important to say we do not have proof this was a metastasis in the pelvis.'

### **The Alpha miracle**

Finally I must comment on the story of Mrs Jean Smith. It is held up as the best example of a healing miracle, chosen from many. The Alpha booklet asserts, 'Some people believe that God chose to confine miraculous healing to the age of the early church. But God is still healing today. In fact, there are so many wonderful stories of God healing that it is difficult to know which to give as an example. I once met a woman called Jean Smith...'<sup>34</sup>

As originally reported in Alpha News, Mrs. Smith claimed to have been healed of blindness.<sup>35</sup> The story itself is not compelling as it speaks strangely of her having mirrors in the back of her eyes. I wrote at that time to the editor, Mr Elsdon-Drew, asking if he had published this story without checking it. If it had been validated by an ophthalmologist, why did he not publish the medical opinion? I urged him to get the story validated and if it was true to publish it with the full weight of medical evidence. He did not reply to me and I have since learned that it was never validated. Yet for the past seventeen years this story has continued to be told in the Alpha Course all over the world.

The Alpha Course is a precious resource for the Church. The latest films for use on the course that I have seen are well produced – but they do need to either validate this miracle or remove it from their programme.

### **Are miracles rare?**

Ernest Lucas and I were entrusted with the task of agreeing a chapter on 'The Significance of Jesus' Healing Ministry' to be included in the final report of the Houghton Consultation.<sup>36</sup> I was grateful that Ernest did all the hard work, but we eventually ran into a disagreement. Ernest wanted to say that Christlike miracles today are rare. But I countered that if we cannot find a single one, how can we say they are rare? That surely is more than we know.

### **Conclusions**

1. The struggle to establish the truth must be a first priority for Christians

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<sup>34</sup> Gumbel, N. *Does God Heal Today?*, Alpha (2011), p.17.

<sup>35</sup> 'The day God gave me back my sight: the story of Mrs Jean Smith', *Alpha News*, June 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Lucas, E. (ed.), *Christian Healing: What can we believe?*, SPCK (1997).

in every discipline. Jesus said, 'I am the Truth' and called his disciples to follow the truth. Before Pilate, he said 'I came into this world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' (Jn 18:37) In following Jesus, we must always stay on the side of truth.

2. The apostle Paul advised that we should test everything (1Thess 5:21) and warned of false signs and wonders, which cause people to believe what is false (2Thess 2:9-12).
3. Lies, half-truths, exaggerations and deceptions always fall short of Christ's standard. We cannot promote the Gospel on the basis of wishful thinking or falsehood.
4. One particular, small group of patients is liable to benefit greatly from miracle healers. These are the hysterics who believe themselves to be physically ill and take to wheelchairs and use crutches to avoid activities which distress them (such as work!). For some, they reach a stage when they want to return to active living but find themselves trapped by their own sickness behaviour. For these people, the healing crusade can give them 'permission' to get out of their wheel chairs and return to active life. Their medical case notes document their many investigations, which are all reported as 'normal'.
5. Even if we conclude that God has not wrought a Christlike miracle for hundreds of years, we do not know what he will do tomorrow. If God is God, surely his hands are not tied, but if we are to understand his purposes, we should take careful note of what he is doing in the world today.
6. If a miracle did occur, it would most likely be immediately self-evident. If a man born blind regained his sight, it would astonish everyone who knew him and be the talk of his town. I have a wheelchair-bound friend with osteogenesis imperfecta. My wife pushes her to church in a wheel chair most weeks. (I am not allowed to push her because I tend to go too fast and it hurts her going over the bumps!) Little more than three foot tall, she has tiny, fragile legs. If she walked into church one day, there would be uproar. It would soon be all over the news bulletins and reported across the world. If my spinal kyphosis was cured, it would be immediately obvious. I would become four inches taller. When Jesus healed the paralysed man who was lowered through the roof, Mark records that 'Everyone was amazed and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"'<sup>37</sup>
7. Our prayers for healing and our counselling of those who are sick need to be sensitive, faithful, wise, and also circumspect in regard for truth in general, and medical science in particular. Assuming God exists, he can

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<sup>37</sup> Mark 2:12.

within limits do as he pleases. Yet he cannot make a square circle – that would be a contradiction in terms. But he could intervene in nature, if that was his will. Imagine falling from a roof. Would you ask God to reverse the law of gravity? Imagine the havoc that would create. Jesus asks us to pray according to God's will, and God seems to have, in general, committed himself to sustaining the physical laws he set in being at Creation. It would be better to pray that you would land on a passing hay cart or a soft topped car. In prayer, we encourage people to entrust themselves to God and to find rest, forgiveness, peace and hope in the Gospel and his eternal purposes: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

8. In our search for truth, we need to read the Book of Nature as well as the Book of Scripture to learn what God is actually doing in the world and how he chooses to fulfil his purposes. If we reduce Christ's miracles to the sort of unverified, anecdotal, subjective vagaries of Alternative Therapy, we will degrade Christ and mislead his people. (Homeopathy, for instance, is a deception, which survives only on the basis of anecdotal stories and has now been largely driven out of the NHS due to its repeated failure to withstand proper scientific scrutiny.<sup>38</sup> It really is not a valid 'alternative'.) We must help Christians to have a positive view of the importance of the scientific method in our quest for truth and to see science as a means God has given us to grow in our understanding of reality and our exercise of dominion over the earth, not least in matters of health.

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<sup>38</sup> see Ernst, E. *Homeopathy – the undiluted facts*, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing (2016).