

## **Testimony and Theodicy: Evangelical Christians, answered and unanswered prayers for healing**

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Most people who regularly attend Christian worship or take part in small group activity associated with churches are familiar with the routine practices of intercessory prayer, and the significant proportion of this which is devoted to petitions for the healing or recovery of those who are sick, especially if they are church members or their relatives or friends. Some churches, especially those with a charismatic or Pentecostal ethos devote specific sessions or whole meetings to prayer for healing, and recognize specific ministries of healing and individuals who are thought to have specific spiritual gifts in this area. Practices and rituals of healing ministry may take an embodied form, with the laying on, or stretching out, of hands by the person doing the ministry, or with the application of oil as a sign or sacrament of anointing following the scriptural practice set out in James 5.14-15.

There is evidence that among Christian believers and other people of faith a large majority of people believe that God can and does heal sickness - and pray and act in faith that this might be so. (Pawlikowski, et al 2015; Levin 2016). However, while such practices are commonplace, and popular treatments of healing ministry such as Wimber and Springer (1991) have a wide readership, reflection on the topic in the theological literature around prayer and healing is relatively scant. Evangelical contributions such as Crump (2006), Gaiser (2010) and Goldingay (n.d.) stand alongside Catholic contributions such as Morill (2009) and Pentecostal ones such as Theron (1999). The question "Why has God answered others' prayers for healing, but not mine?" is frequently articulated by believers and brief pastoral articles such as Ortberg (2005) are published in Christian magazines and blogs. Greig (2011) is a substantial accessible treatment of this issue.

A recent growth in interest in practical and narrative theology has explored the accounts and theological reflections of ordinary believers about the work of God in relation to their faith and prayers. Cartledge, (2013) in a case study of one British congregation gives an account of ordinary Pentecostal theology, while Grosseohme, (1996) analyses images of God from hospital prayers. Black, (1999) provides a rich set of narratives of elderly African-American women explaining their relationship with God in a context of poverty and suffering. There are also more anthropological studies of particular contexts of prayer and healing such as Harris (2013) on Lourdes, Meyer (1998) on

Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse and Oosthuizen (1989) on Afro-Christian religion and healing in Southern Africa.

In a more empirical scientific framework there is a growing range of studies around spirituality, prayer and health outcomes. Chibnall, et al (2001) Halperin, (2001) and Masters (2005) engage in debate as to whether academic medical centres should conduct clinical trials of the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Dossey (1993) is an early review of evidence on this question. Simão, et al. (2016) offers a more recent systematic literature review. A total of 92 papers were identified and 12 were included in the review. Prayer was considered a positive factor in seven studies, and several positive effects of prayer on health were identified.

Over recent years in the fields of social science, social policy and public health the study and measurement of happiness and well-being has expanded rapidly. The international research literature across the disciplines is well documented, discussed and theorised by the late John Atherton (2014). Atherton, places great emphasis on economics, and argues that technological and economic advances of the past two centuries has had a direct and substantial positive impact, not only on health but on happiness and subjective wellbeing. Atherton seeks to locate the debate in the context of religious studies, and specifically around the role of Christianity in this area. However, he does not talk in any depth about prayer for healing or the theology of specific divine intervention in human health and illness.

In sociology of religion and religious studies concerns around health, healing and embodiment have become more salient in recent years. The recent turn to lived everyday religion (McGuire, (2008), Ammerman, (2014)) means that an older paradigm centred around belief is being supplanted by concerns about, spirituality, rituals and embodied practices (Jupp and Flanagan; 2007). In some ways, recently emphasised concerns and disciplines around health and fitness may be interpreted as a new religion for a neo-liberal consumerist age, where the authority of churches and other institutions has considerably eroded, and traditional social norms are less important than individual choice and responsibility. Woodhead (2007) and Sointu and Woodhead (2008) argue a strong case that the growth of holistic religion, embodied rituals and self-expression of spirituality need to be analysed through a gendered framework.

In this context the purpose of this paper is to present and analyse some new data from evangelical Christians in the UK on their beliefs, experiences and reflections around prayer and healing. Testimonies of what they see as answers to prayer will be set alongside their theodicies around unanswered prayer with a view to exploring ordinary everyday theology of living in sickness and in health.

## **Methodology**

The twenty-first century Evangelicals research programme takes the form of a quarterly online survey on various topics of relevance to Christians. It is completed by a panel of volunteers recruited through the membership and networks of the Evangelical Alliance. Typically, around 4000 people are invited

by email and further open invitations via social media recruit a few hundred additional respondents in each wave of the survey. Although there is an element of churn or turnover in the panel each quarter, regular monitoring suggests a consistent demography in our sample in terms of age, gender, ethnicity (over 90 per cent are white British), places of residence (with a concentration in London and the South of England). They come from a wide range of Protestant church denominations, typically 30 per cent are Anglican, 20-25 per cent from independent charismatic networks and 20-25 per cent Baptist, with around 10 per cent each from Free Church, Independent Evangelical and Pentecostal streams. We know that our panel is predominantly middle to upper class. (In our “Working faithfully?” survey in May 2013, 24 per cent were higher professionals and a further 47 per cent intermediate professionals. Our “Do we value education?” survey in November 2012 shows that our panel members are highly educated on the whole, placing a high value on education: 70 per cent have a university degree and 41 per cent have postgraduate qualifications.

Our health survey of around 1700 evangelical Christians in summer 2015 allows us to investigate what they believe and practise in terms of their understanding of God's role in health and healing. We included both multiple choice (tick box) questions which produce statistical data and open ended free text questions which allowed respondents to express their experiences and reflections at length in their own words. In line with the usual demographics of the panel the respondents to this survey are predominantly of the older generation (51 per cent were born in the 1940's or 1950s) There is also a bias in the sample in terms of gender with 56.4 per cent of our evangelical respondents being men, and the gender imbalance is most pronounced in the older age groups. No attempt has been made use weighting to correct for these biases.

### **Do you believe God miraculously heals the sick today?**

Almost without exception our panel of evangelical Christians believe that God can and does intervene with miracles of healing. 28 per cent think this happens often and a further 70 per cent sometimes.

However, as shown in Table 1 there is a widespread rejection of the idea that because of a person's faith God will always heal, and there is also much support for a rational, secular, scientific and practically grounded approach to health and medicine. There are indications too that these evangelicals adopt a responsible approach to healthy living - in the last 12 months 84 per cent said they had tried to eat a healthy diet, 54 per cent that they maintained a long term active lifestyle, involving playing sport, cycling, walking etc., 30 per cent tried to reduce stress levels, 28 per cent had gone on a diet to lose weight and 23 per cent followed a fitness programme. While only 20 per cent were total abstainers from alcohol, 81 per cent said they had never drunk to excess or smoked, and 14 per cent and 17 per cent had given up respectively.

**Table One**

Answer Options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	SA + Agree
If you have faith God will always heal your diseases	3 per cent	5 per cent	15 per cent	<b>37 per cent</b>	<b>40 per cent</b>	<b>8 per cent</b>
When we are ill it is always wise to seek medical help, even if we believe God can heal us	<b>59 per cent</b>	<b>36 per cent</b>	3 per cent	1 per cent	1 per cent	<b>95 per cent</b>
Christians should lead healthy lifestyles to look after their God-given bodies	<b>38 per cent</b>	<b>55 per cent</b>	6 per cent	1 per cent	1 per cent	<b>92 per cent</b>
Being involved in a local church is good for people's health and well-being	<b>41 per cent</b>	<b>48 per cent</b>	8 per cent	1 per cent	1 per cent	<b>90 per cent</b>
My church offers lots of help and support to members when they are ill	16 per cent	50 per cent	23 per cent	9 per cent	2 per cent	<b>66 per cent</b>
My church offers lots of help and support to people in the local community when they are ill	4 per cent	26 per cent	39 per cent	26 per cent	5 per cent	<b>31 per cent</b>
Churches need training in order to strengthen their healing ministry	22 per cent	50 per cent	21 per cent	5 per cent	2 per cent	<b>72 per cent</b>
answered question						1591
skipped question						112

So how do these Christians frame their prayers for the sick?

- 86 per cent used prayers “that God will guide and help the medics and bring healing through their treatments” and 84 per cent said their church did so.
- 83 per cent prayed “generally in the hope that God will help or comfort the person who is suffering” and 82 per cent said their church did so.
- 64 per cent prayed “with strong faith and confidence that God will heal” and 69 per cent said their church did so.
- 55 per cent used laying on for hands and 65 per cent said their church did so.
- 26 per cent used anointing with oil and 59 per cent said their church did so.
- 16 per cent were involved in praying for healing on the streets and 31 per cent said their church did so.

### **Favourite Scriptures on healing**

Over 400 people cited Scriptural texts that shaped their views of prayer and healing.

Among the most popular were a group of verses that contain a positive view on God's power to heal.

- various gospel stories where Jesus miraculously healed
- Isaiah 53.5 *By his stripes / wounds you have been healed.* Quoted in 1 Peter 2.24,
- Isaiah 40 .31 *Those that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be tired.*
- Psalm 103.2-3: *Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,*
- Exodus 15.26. he said, *“If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you”*
- Jeremiah: 29.11 *“I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you...”*
- Romans 8.28 *‘All things work together for good to those who love God’ NIV “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,”*

- *James 5.14-15 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.*

In contrast there were a few popular verses which speak of God's comfort and grace in the midst of suffering

- *2 Corinthians 12. 7-8 I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*
- *Psalm 23.4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

And those which have eschatological reference.

- *Romans 8:18-25, In hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*
- *Rev 21:4, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, "*

## **Testimonies**

Just under half of those who replied (49 per cent) testified they had personally received divine healing at least once in their life and for 8 per cent this had been within the last year. Women were significantly more likely than men to testify to a recent healing. (10 per cent v 4 per cent). The oldest respondents were more likely to testify to a personal healing at least once in their lifetime, though the youngest age cohort were more likely to mention something within the previous year. Surprisingly perhaps, rather smaller numbers testified healing for a family member (41 per cent in all) while 68 per cent testified about someone in their church and 62 per cent about someone else they knew.

185 people added some extended comments about the healing they had received or witnessed. Of these about 55 were autobiographical accounts where the respondent was the "patient". Of these 38 spoke exclusively about divine or miraculous healing, another ten were cases where medical intervention played a part, but the outcome was attributed to God and prayer, while the remainder were more ambiguous in the respondent's interpretation of events. A sample of such first-hand testimonies is given below including vivid accounts of prayer leading to healing from allergies, back pain, infertility and gallstones among other conditions. We make no attempt to judge the veracity of these accounts in

terms of medical science or other interpretative frameworks but let the respondents' stories speak for themselves.

*I have been healed of major long term allergies. I no longer need the daily medication that I had to take for 12 years.*

*I fell and fractured several ribs - acutely painful. Had hands laid on, prayer, felt something like an electric shock go through that side of my body. Pain disappeared instantly and never had significant pain in the 6 weeks or so it took to heal*

*From age 14 to 28 I wore glasses to read or drive. All but one of my wedding photographs show me wearing glasses. A teenager prayed for me and I didn't wear glasses for the next 40 years. I now wear them to read when the light is not strong but not to drive.*

*Prayer gave healing from self harming dramatically. I have prayed for back pain and it went immediately*

*Thirty years ago I had a substantial back problem which recurred several times. I was prayed for and it disappeared and has never come back*

*I tore tissue in my left hand and had to give up my teaching and playing violin. I received a prophetic word at a camp, and knew the Lord had said he had given the healing. There was no change. About a year later when fasting the Lord healed it in the night and straightened the finger action, so I can play the violin again in worship. Fasting released the miracle.*

*I was healed of 10 years of infertility supernaturally!*

*My unborn child was wrong way round, I received prayer in the cathedral, the baby turned there and then. He is now 25 years ago. It was the beginning of my return to faith.*

*I had severe gall stones and was due to have gall bladder removed surgically. God removed the stones as a result of prayer. The gall bladder was removed anyway, no stones, the doctor was amazing as the scan had shown the sac was full of stones. I told him about prayer in the form of testimony. He smiled and said "miracles do happen"*

Another category of healing testimonies was cases which involved some level of medical intervention

*I believe God was guiding the medical staff when my bowel cancer was removed in an operation. Whether this was 'Divine Healing' or not I cannot tell. I'm just grateful to him that I am healed.*

*When I was initially diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I asked God to completely heal me. Even though it was not spontaneous, I believe that through medication, a*

*healthy lifestyle and godly friends and family, I have remained well (for the most part) for over a decade. I would call that divine/miraculous healing!*

*In 1970 I worked for Glaxo Laboratories who arranged for me to have a kidney operation. The evening before going into [...] hospital my Elim church prayed for me (in response to a message in tongues and interpretation saying that "there is someone with a need, and if they will confess it, I the Lord your God will meet it". I was in hospital for three days and then sent home to return for another three days the following week. They never operated and wouldn't tell me what was going on and that I had to see my GP. This I did. the first time he had received nothing from the hospital but about 10 days later he received a letter saying both my kidneys were functioning 100 per cent*

*I have had a very painful knee which was greatly helped with a steroid injection 4 months ago. When it happened again many people prayed and it was painless after 2 days!*

*I made a significant recovery from schizophrenia in 1984, and people were amazed how quickly I was healed and that I kept my faith during my illness; although I still need medication.*

*I had a head injury with low chance of surviving the neurosurgery and am very grateful to be here*

*My hip pain was healed at New Wine (conference event). The breast cancer was much reduced in size through prayer prior to surgery (evidence from mammogram / ultrasound and post-operative histology).*

*When I was born I was critically ill with galactosaemia and had an emergency baptism. The condition was poorly understood at that time and was usually fatal. I recovered because of dairy-free milk and the knowledge and skill of one particular consultant. I'm sure that God placed him in the right place and time to help me, and the prayers of my parents and their church made all the difference. The distinction between divine and medical healing is a grey area and I don't think it matters.*

*I was healed of stomach discomfort after reading Jonah's prayer, and have had conditions that ultimately responded to healing ministry, including my last hospitalisation (for broken wrist) 2009.*

*I was born with a genetic condition which causes profound infertility and prevents me from producing egg cells, yet I have had two spontaneous and entirely unassisted pregnancies and have two perfectly healthy adult daughters. No-one prayed about this at the time as I was undiagnosed and had no knowledge of my condition, but since it has come to light I have appreciated that these pregnancies were so rare that I need to give thanks for their miraculous nature. Doctors have said that my genetic condition might have been diagnosed sooner but the fact that I had children made them discount this particular*



*condition because pregnancy is so rare.*

*Several examples, but earlier this year I was in severe pain. I was not healed, because I still need the operation - due next week, but after the prayers of friends, the pain was removed, and I have been comfortable since. It was a real miracle, and my GP can't understand why I am not in pain.*

*I was only given a 30 per cent chance of surviving 5 years after all my surgery and medical treatment was completed and I did, but is this divine healing?*

There was also this interesting account of a “divine providence” which saved a person who was on the verge of suicide.

*I wanted to die and took an overdose but God gave me back my life through bringing a couple who were walking their dog on Folkestone cliffs. They called an ambulance. I don't know if you would call this divine healing or not.*

A similar range of stories about family members and fellow church members were also recorded. These include the following:

*My niece (was) instantly healed of ME*

*Son aged 16 was within an hour of dying from meningitis. Huge amount of prayer by many through prayer chains. Survived, recovered, with almost no residual effects*

*My son had drug addiction problems. There were times that I didn't know if he was alive or dead. He had given his heart to the Lord as a child. I used passages of scripture when praying for him. He is now free and thriving.*

*My Wife. Inoperable neck tumour (though other tumours remained and required operations)*

*My son healed from a fever in an isolated situation - later I found colleagues 50 miles away had been moved to pray for us that same day he was healed.*

*Hard to categorise this, but at Christmas my mother was taken seriously ill and when we left her in hospital in the early hours of Boxing Day the doctor gave her about 1 in 3 chance of pulling through. She did, but with that sort of assessment of her chances can't specifically say it was down to prayer.*

*I believe all healing is divine healing - but couldn't say specifically that because my son's cancer has officially gone that it was the Lord and not the surgeon.*

*My granddaughter did not breath for the first 30 mins of her life...every step she has taken in the last 5 years has been a miracle. This would be a long testimony.*

*Mum was in coma for several days. Doctors told us she would be gone in a few days. We started to plan a funeral. She woke up started talking and using a spoon to eat. she lived 9 further months when she gave her heart to Christ. 3 months after this she went to be with him.*

*The only instantaneous and unequivocal healing I have observed was when I saw a woman with back trouble prayed for by a YWAM visiting team to our church. Without shouting, fuss, music, whatever, someone asked her to put both feet on the chair on front (while sitting), pointed out the legs did not seem the same length, and quietly prayed. As her feet were within inches of me, I did see one foot move up by a centimetre of so, till the two feet were level.*

*I was uncertain whether to record this, as the person concerned has recently died. However, a church member being given only months to live, on their next scan was told by the doctors that they could now find no trace of cancer. He lived cancer free for some months. The cancer did return, and he very recently passed away, but he did live for around 1 - 1 1/2 years longer than the doctors expected.*

*Someone in my church was on the brink of death, was prayed for at his bedside and made a miraculous recovery.*

*A 78 year old fell 8 foot off a ladder left a head-shaped blood mark on a concrete step yet is now walking and helping others - he says it's miraculous - all with great NHS help too.*

*Lady in the village for whom we prayed that every cancer cell in her body was removed and when she went back for her check up the cancer had gone without chemo therapy which she declined. PTL*

A number of respondents had been involved in intentional prayer ministry either through teams in their church or in groups practising Healing on the Streets, or in more informal church settings. They offered numerous testimonies of answered prayer and what they understood to be miraculous healing. Some of the accounts are quite stunning. However, in most cases these witness accounts are either somewhat vague, or lack verification from the "patient".

*I am on prayer ministry team and prayed for a young man with moderate to severe back and hip pain which ceased his sporting activities and affected any movement causing pain. He was on strong analgesics. After prayer he was shocked and delighted to be able to touch his toes, bend his back and bend and lift his left leg without pain. During prayer God showed me he had to forgive someone so I asked him if there was someone he had not forgiven. He said his ex-girlfriend had deeply hurt him and then prayed forgiving her for what she had done and for what that caused him to feel. Then released her in to God's hands and blessed her.*

*After this I prayed for healing and he was healed.*

*I am active in a Christian healing ministry and frequently encounter lived experiences of divine healing episodes.*

*When a headteacher a child was critically injured on a residential school journey. While being treated in hospital the Christians on the journey spent the night in prayer and we prayed at the hospital. The child made a swift full recovery. The consultant, not a Christian, said "this must be a miracle".*

*A young man - not a committed Christian at the time - who had been suffering from really bad tonsillitis for months and was barely able to speak was telling me how low he was. I offered to pray with him, hoping that it might make a psychological difference. I placed my hands on his throat and prayed. When I stopped he looked at me, swallowed, and said, "It's gone!" Such was my lack of faith in divine healing at the time (in spite of knowing it CAN happen) that I said, "It can't have done!" However, he assured me it was now absolutely gone. It never came back and my faith (and I hope his) took a huge leap forward. Praise the Lord.*

*I prayed for someone on my last church and she told everyone God had healed her of a stomach condition.*

*I have prayed for a Muslim's back and shoulder, she got healed - in May and June respectively. In July, prayed for a church member's back and he is healed. Last Dec, prayed for someone who has degenerated disease, she got healed. X-ray showed the hole has been mended.*

*We prayed for a baby born with a tumour on his liver. A few days later, before operating, they scanned his tummy, to find that the tumour had disappeared!*

*A lady I prayed for was a physio and, unbeknown to me, had an epidural scar on her back, just where I put my hand to pray. The scar was impeding her work as a physio. She rang the next day to say that, when they were going to bed, her husband noticed that the scar had disappeared - praise God!*

*I saw people healed when I prayed for them as part of a mission trip overseas.*

*We prayed for a lady who was dying that she might live. Eventually she was on a life support machine waiting for her son to arrive from South America to authorise switching off. When it was switched off, she started breathing. She made complete recovery. Doctors were stunned. She said it was because a Fellowship in Scotland had prayed for her. She now attends church weekly.*

*I once prayed in my mind for a man with a learning disability suffering severe pain from kidney stones as I held his hand by his hospital bed. The pain clearly stopped and he was at peace. Later he told me he knew I was praying for him and that God had stopped the pain.*

*A lady of over 90 died during a church service. A trained nurse and a first aider were unable to find a pulse but the vicar, my husband and myself prayed and suddenly she took a deep breath and sat up.*

*I have healed epilepsy in Jesus' name, bruising disappeared, back problems from very severe, (unable to move) to less severe. Warts disappeared, seen legs lengthened Witnessed new teeth in place of gaps in gums. Swellings disappear on necks, knees,*

*I had a friend who took such a massive overdose her liver function reached 0 from which the doctors said it was irrecoverable. I've never prayed so intensely and continuously but her Mum prayed too. She recovered and returned to a full active life. I found that to be miraculous.*

*Prayed for a boy with back pain two weeks ago, one leg was short. In prayer his legs visibly straightened, and his back pain was healed. This was part of a local retired Bishop's healing course.*

### **Disappointments over Healing prayer**

In contrast with the 49 per cent who testified that they had received healing at least once as many as 71 per cent said they had experienced one or more disappointments over prayers for healing. 12 per cent had been disappointed for themselves, 24 per cent for someone close and 35 per cent for someone their church had been praying for. Several of the people who had given a personal testimony of receiving God's healing also had experienced disappointments or unanswered prayers. (103 people had both a personal testimony of being healed and a disappointment about their own situation, 167 people both had a personal testimony of being healed and a disappointment about someone close to themselves while 261 people both had a personal testimony of being healed and a disappointment about someone their church had been praying for.). This suggests that even those who believe God does and has healed in response to prayer, find they need to come to terms with the times where this evidently does not occur.

321 respondents added some extended comments about the disappointments they had faced in respect of prayer for healing.

*I was prayed for and anointed with oil by the minister and elders. Although I did not experience healing of my illness I have been given renewed grace for coping with long term illness.*

*I have had some difficulty in coming to terms with close friends whose healing has not been forthcoming, but strangely, no problem in accepting that healing for myself is probably not in God's plan for me.*

*Prayed for healing, although God did not heal miraculously, he did heal through skills of surgeon, with very quick rehabilitation time and no complications*

*In a previous church I was prayed for regularly for healing. It became very difficult and I found myself feeling very guilty for not being healed. People asked constantly how I was feeling. I felt I had to say I was feeling better even if I was feeling awful. I know people were being kind but it just became like a pressure.*

*Both I and my son have serious migraines; [we're] still waiting on God and my faith perhaps to get it together; my friend is still waiting on healing in his legs.*

*For me - my cancers had not been healed. For a friend - her cancer was not healed. For a church member's husband - he died.*

*I was not cured of infertility and therefore will never have children.*

*In my late teens many people quite insistently prayed for healing of my insulin-dependent diabetes. It caused me years of heartache, guilt, disappointment and confusion. I am not sure I have ever completely recovered, although I keep this pretty well-hidden!*

*My husband still died of prostate cancer despite lots of prayer. Also my mobility continues to get worse.*

*My son has a congenital condition that has been prayed for several times since he was a baby, but it has not been removed.*

*My daughter took her own life in 2014.*

*My God-daughter [...] We had great faith for full healing. She died age 7 after 7 years of pain and battle.*

*I prayed for a friend who was a paranoid schizophrenic in February including laying of hands and commanding the demons to leave her. She committed suicide two weeks later.*

*I find it hard to see my daughter's ongoing suffering with ME, when the church has prayed over her many times, and it would have been such a witness for so many, including my son and my husband who lost their faith through this. I find it difficult to pray with confidence for her and for my husband because of it.*

*I have several friends with ME and other auto-immune issues, a long and very frustrating issue for them with no or little apparent change*

*Our daughter has been prayed for - on one occasion someone turned to me and said 'she'll get her healing now'; this was not helpful. Nothing apparent happened. I do believe our prayers have been heard, as we are still functioning as a*

*family, but am heartily sick of Christian clichés and find some wording in Christian songs unhelpful.*

*My mum (aged 59) was taken ill very suddenly. She lived in Spain and I flew out to see her because we were told it was very serious. I utterly believed that God would heal her [...] I really did not doubt it, but she died the next day.*

*Those occasions when, in an attempt to follow the model of James 5, the elders have been called, there has been confession of sin, and prayer, with laying on of hands and anointing with oil, and the situation has continued to deteriorate.*

## **Resolving the Theodicy**

How then do evangelicals explain and deal emotionally and theologically with the issue of unanswered or evidently unsuccessful prayers for healing? Given that they generally understand God to be all powerful, all loving and benevolent Father who longs to respond to the prayers of his faithful children, and that they often read and refer to the stories of healing miracles in the New Testament, and to Jesus' teaching that disciples should "ask, seek and knock", be persistent in prayer and that the prayer of faith can move mountains the issue of theodicy is an important and difficult one.

170 respondents offered comments including those below which can be grouped into a number of distinct themes ranked in order of frequency of mention below

### **God's (inscrutable) sovereignty**

*We have been praying for my granddaughter (16) as a family, church and worldwide, to be healed from her terminal cancer but as yet he has seen fit for her to continue to be ill. We entirely trust him that His promise that 'All things work together for good to those who love him' will be fulfilled whether she is healed or not.*

*It is not always easy to discern answered prayer*

*No prayer is unanswered. I may not like or understand God's response but it is my place to discern what God is about in difficult circumstances - my own or other peoples.*

*We pray in faith and hope, but God sometimes chooses not to answer our prayers in the way we would wish.*

*My husband aged 46 years died of cancer in 1986 despite lots of prayer, and my sister died last year due to a surgeon's mistake (full responsibility has been accepted by the hospital) despite prayer meetings all over England and Northern Ireland. I just have to accept that God knows best, although I am still hurting so much.*

*God doesn't always choose to heal. His purposes are higher than ours, and he sees the bigger picture. Of course, there are times when I'm sad people haven't got better, but I must leave that with God.*

*There is a mystery in God's dealing with our prayers and we must always respect his sovereignty.*

*I trust and praise God whatever the outcome. The Kingdom of God is not fully come in this world*

*I believe that the Lord is the one who heals, either miraculously or via modern medicine. When prayer appears not to be answered, the Lord has a reason. The situation will still be better in some way or ways than if there had been no prayer.*

*Yes I am constantly disappointed that God doesn't run the universe the way I want him to - but then again I'm less clever than I like to think!*

*I believe that death or ongoing illness can be part of God's good purpose for me/others.*

□ **the gift of grace to endure pain and suffering**

*God does not always heal physically: My wife died of cancer, completely sound spiritually.*

*There is not always healing but God always gives a word of encouragement or blessing.*

*God chose not to heal me for the moment, but I believe strongly that he gives grace and strength for each day. Doesn't mean that life is easy though!*

*I think that healing doesn't necessarily mean an illness goes, I think it is also to do with peace and renewed or deepened relationship with God.*

*God sometimes allows suffering to fulfil His purposes, e.g. Job par excellence, or to teach us something, e.g. to trust him, to make us depend on him etc. - "*

□ **the context of eternity and heaven – death is not the end**

*Sometimes he seems to just take His people 'home' maybe to 'rest'. Conducting the funeral of a saint of God can be a peaceful, even joy- touched event for me and for believing families. -what a "sure and certain hope" we have of a bodily resurrection. "Tears of joy flood my soul.*

*No one lives for ever on the earth. We will all die so it is unreasonable for us to think that God will always heal and it will always be as he wills.*

*One of the earliest lessons I learned in healing ministry was that people are healed differently. One lady I visited each week in B... hospital was terminally ill with cancer. She always asked for prayer for healing. On one occasion, as I finished praying her face was glowing. I asked what she had experienced. She had seen a vision of her baby daughter alongside Jesus. The daughter had died over 10 years before and she had never forgiven God for this loss. Having seen this vision she saw how much God loved her. The lady promptly gave her life to Jesus. Over the remaining days of her life she evangelised her family. The funeral was a time of celebration.*

*My son died when he was 7 from cancer. We prayed and he lived for 3 years with the disease rather than the 3 weeks we were initially told, but we lost the battle at the last hurdle. It was a disappointment but not with God. We live in a reality where the kingdom of God is not fully realised!*

*One of my sisters had long term Parkinson's Disease and a number of other issues. It was disappointing that she was never fully healed, but it did not destroy or alter or reduce my faith in God. There are many things that will not be explained until the other side of eternity.*

*It all depends on what you mean by disappointment; death is the greatest healing, but often the most disappointing*

*A 20 year old lad, full of faith and testimony, had leukaemia and appeared to be beating it [...] with much prayer from many around the world. However, he quite quickly died after a brain tumour was discovered. There were over 500 people at his thanksgiving service, one lady giving her life to the Lord because of the strong sense of God's presence, and his testimony and blog live on!*

- **some scepticism about claims of miraculous healing or a theological view that miracles have ceased at the end of the apostolic age.**

*The healing ministry as often practised by evangelical churches is a huge distraction, often promotes unrealistic expectation, frequently disappoints and, I am afraid to say, is often fraudulent.*

*the miraculous happens in the third world but in the UK we are so money and risk aware that the supernatural is often excluded though talked about it rarely happens in my experience*

*Saddened by prophecies and prayers demanding / assuming God's healing.*

*I believe the bible teaches that healing was for the Apostolic age and ceased with the completion of the canon of scripture. I believe God CAN heal if he wants to, but that he chooses to do so very rarely.*



*I am medically qualified and so often there is a medical reason and the present emphasis on healing causes so much pain for those who are not 'healed' it is attitudes that need healing too!*

*When I most needed it, I was too ill to get to the healing service!*

□ **a deficiency of faith or discernment in believers praying**

*At one time I used to pray and lay hands on the sick and wondered if God had given me a gift in this area. At that time I was praying for a friend's mother who had cancer, really believing God would heal her, even as she appeared to become sicker. After she died it was a long time before I prayed for anyone in this way again and when I did it was not with a great amount of faith.*

*I've come to the conclusion it's important to be led by the Spirit in this area, to pray only at His prompting and for what God is doing, not what I want to happen. My problem is acquiring that sensitivity to him so that I know what he is wanting to do.*

*Recently my church was praying for a member who subsequently died. Looking back at this experience I sense that we were not in full agreement about the objective. For example, some were praying for successful medical treatment, some for the Lord's "will" to be done. It was all a bit haphazard.*

*I believe God is concerned with wholeness, not just physical health, and if we ask him he will often reveal the underlying cause, which needs first to be addressed.*

*At first I thought there was too much emphasis on healing, but then I realized the gospels are full of healing and Jesus trained the disciples in it and then said that those who followed would do "greater things" (in His strength). So I love this emphasis now and I love how it brings people to know Christ!*

Across the piece the evidence from British evangelical Christians suggests there is a wide range of perspectives on divine healing and prayer. A relatively small group are enthusiasts, with strong expectation of frequent Pentecostal or charismatic outpourings of healing power.

*I believe that God is about to release a surge of his Holy Spirit in healing and revival. When this happens, we will need to hear very specifically how he wants to heal, not just plonk our hands on people and hope. When this happens, we will see huge amounts of people experience all kinds of miracles*

But there are also those who are sceptical and see the dangers of raising false expectations of a God who always will work a miracle if only we have faith to ask.

*I find it difficult to believe without evidence. I think many people exaggerate the miraculous which then diminishes the real miracles that take place.*

The majority of the respondents seem to hold a more nuanced view that God can and does heal in response to prayer, sometimes miraculously but often through the use of means – scientific modern medicine

*I believe God heals through the work of doctors and medical treatment, difficult to separate divine healing from healing through medication and health services etc. through which God may work.*

*I praise God when he heals someone by ordinary or extraordinary means and I praise God when he chooses to not heal in this world and instead gives grace to live with problems or grace to die well and go to be with him forever.*

Such Christians believe it is important to think Biblically and deeply about health and healing, though it is not just a question of good theology or skills training.

*I don't think you can 'train' to have the gift of healing-it is a gift not a reward for good study. But I think as a whole ministry it is often misunderstood by church who need training as a whole on the biblical truth, the vision, and the practicalities of having a healing prayer ministry*

In pastoral terms this leads many churches and ministers towards a middle way, of faithful and hopeful prayer, coupled with practical tender loving care and practical support from the church.

*I believe that God sometimes heals today. I don't believe that he always does so, even for people who really love him. I think the Church needs to find a middle way of providing prayer, care and support for those who are unwell, and a blame-free environment if they are not supernaturally healed.*

*Sometimes the issue is support through an illness, which church is very good at!*

And finally, there are those who prioritise the secular public health messages of taking some control over one's personal health and wellbeing. These include 92 per cent who agree that:

*Christians should lead healthy lifestyles to look after their God-given bodies*

and the single voice that challenges churches to take responsibility for the obesity crisis which currently concerns the public health profession.

*I think churches need to serve less cake and biscuits! Also those of us who struggle with weight issues can be very judged and shamed, even in church, and yet the environment is often not conducive to a healthy lifestyle. I have also heard*

*sermons where comments are made about obesity which is frankly insensitive and wrong. It is a very complex area within the wider health debate, but I firmly believe the church should have a voice and be offering support in this area which counteracts the current diet industry offers and does this with the most compassionate approach possible.*

The common experience of human beings in their sicknesses and health coupled with the age old and continuing pastoral and prayerful concern of the Christian Church for human flourishing entails that prayer and healing will always have a central role in religious life. While there are many diverse views and experiences among evangelical Christians, and a plethora of scientific and less scientific approaches to healing and health in the wider culture it is to be hoped that the evidence presented in this paper will enable church leaders and others do deal more knowledgeably and sensitively with the theological and pastoral issues that church members are grappling with on a day by day basis.

There is potential for further comparative research among Christians from other denominations and streams within the wider church, for those from other faith communities, people in the general population who might be described as “believing but not belonging” and the religious “nones”. In pastoral practice in parishes and congregations these findings highlight the need for honest and sensitive discussions and exploration of relevant Scriptures in small group work and discipleship mentoring as well as in public preaching and teaching.

[www.theologyandministry.org](http://www.theologyandministry.org)

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