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Petitionary Prayer for Healing and South African Pentecostals

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Abstract

Most Pentecostals accept and proclaim that God answers petitionary prayers of believers for prayer, whether for themselves or someone else, based on the clear evidence found in biblical texts. Their worship services regularly contain testimonies of believers or about believers whose prayers were miraculously answered. However, to what extent is it true that their prayers are answered, and how probable it is that it can be proven as the outcome of prayer if their desire is granted? Is their belief in answered petitionary prayer justified? Or should they rather stay agnostic about answered prayers? The article uses grammatical-historical exegesis to consider biblical evidence and published empirical research reports related to healing in response to prayer before Pentecostal hermeneutics is used to reconsider and formulate a classical Pentecostal viewpoint.

Keywords

prayer – Pentecostals – illness – medical help – prayer of faith

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1 Introduction

Most Christians believe that God answers their prayers. Prayer is defined as thoughts, words, or deeds that address or petition a divine entity or force in prayer. Believers trust God for responding to their requests for their family, friends and their own health and well-being. In some cases, their prayers are not answered, and in some cases, it challenges Christians' trust in God. However, they testify that God does answer their petitions in many other cases.

2 Use of Medicine by Early Pentecostals

Initially, Pentecostals rejected the use of medicine and taught that God's answer to all illnesses was to be found in a deep trust that God would heal in response to the sincere belief that God always heals.¹ The Pentecostal movement grew out of several movements, such as the Evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Pietism, the holiness movement and the faith-healing movement with European leaders like Johann Blumhardt, Dorothea Trudel, and Otto Stockmayer while Ethan O Allen, Charles Cullis, and John Alexander Dowie were the most significant American exponents. Especially John Dowie of the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion (CCACZ), the 'apostle of healing', became well-known in the period from 1894 to 1905, as Oral Roberts did since the Second World War.² Dowie's International Divine Healing Association established a network of adherents worldwide. He built the biggest faith house in the USA, a tabernacle housing eight thousand people, and established an utopian community, the city of Zion in Illinois. Chappell describes him as 'a flamboyant and persuasive healing evangelist who focused his ministry almost exclusively upon the practice of faith healing ...'.³

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- 1 The discussion is limited to classical Pentecostals, the legacy of the Pentecostal revivals at the beginning of the twentieth century. Douglas Jacobsen (*The World's Christians: Why They Are, and How They Got There* [Chichester: Wiley, 2nd edn, 2020]) refers to them as Pentecostals proper, in contrast to charismatic Christians and a Pentecostal penumbra. In 2020, Pentecostals/charismatics were an estimated 644 million, according to William Kay (*Pentecostalism* [London: SCM, 2009], p. 12), comprising 8.3 percent of the world's population.
 - 2 P.G. Chappell, 'The Divine Healing Movement in America' (PhD Dissertation, Drew University, 1983), p. 284.
 - 3 Chappell, 'The Divine Healing Movement in America', p. 286.

Dowie's radicalism is found in his teaching that faith healing always takes place immediately and assuredly for those having faith and his absolute rejection of any medical help, including medicine. He was hostile towards all medical staff and demeaned their efforts as service to Satan, thus incurring their anger.⁴ Chappell speculates that his extreme resistance to medical help comes from his student days when he worked part-time as a lay chaplain in Edinburgh's university hospital.⁵ He attended lectures of famous Scottish medical specialists and came under the impression that the medical science of his day was not an exact science and that doctors' diagnosis in many cases was not based on facts.

John G Lake and Thomas Hezmalhacl were the first missionaries from the Pentecostal revival in Azusa Street in Los Angeles to come to South Africa in 1908. Primarily Lake was influenced by Dowie. He was converted in Dowie's ministry and served as an elder in the CCACZ, after Dowie prayed for Lake's severe rheumatism in his Healing Home, and Lake was healed instantly. In Lake's own words,

Do you know when my legs straightened out it taught me the beginning of one of the deepest lessons that ever came to my life. It taught me that God did not appreciate a man with crooked legs, any more than He does with a crooked soul. I saw the abundant power of the Gospel of salvation, and that it was placed at the disposal of man to remove the unChristlikeness of his life, and if there was unChristlikeness in the body, we could get rid of the curse by coming to God and being made whole.⁶

Lake took his sick brother and sister to the Healing Home, and they were also eventually healed.

When Lake's own wife became ill, he read Acts 10: and realised that Jesus is the Healer and Satan the oppressor. This became the key to his message and ministry.⁷ His wife refused any medical help but was healed instantly after his prayer of faith.

After a stay in Zion City since 1901, where Lake focused on the ministry of divine healing, he became convinced of the baptism in the Spirit as a necessity for all believers.⁸ While praying with Thomas Hezmalhalch for a woman

4 Nico Horn, 'John Alexander Dowie. 'n Tydige Les Uit die Verlede' (John Alexander Dowie. A Timely Lesson From the Past), *Pinksterboodskapper* 9.9 (1984), pp. 2–4 (3).

5 Chappell, 'The Divine Healing Movement in America, pp. 289, 290.

6 Wilford Reidt, *John G. Lake: A Man Without Compromise* (Tulsa: Harrison, 1989), p. 30.

7 Reidt, *John G. Lake*, p. 18.

8 I.S.V.D.M Burger, *Die Geskiedenis van die Apostoliese Geloof Sending van Suid-Afrika (1908–1958)* (The history of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa [1908–1958])

suffering from a rheumatic infection, Lake started to pray in tongues. As a result of the experience, Lake writes: 'My nature became so sensitized that I could lay hands on any man or woman and tell what organ was diseased, and to what extent, and all about it'.⁹ Lake and William Seymour, the drive spring at the Los Angeles revival, became good friends.¹⁰ Lake and Hezmalhalch both felt called to bring the Pentecostal message to South Africa. The Zionist assembly in Johannesburg invited them to take some services after their leader returned to America. Lake changed the assembly overnight into a Pentecostal group when many members experienced Spirit baptism.¹¹ At the very first service, the Black employee of an affluent family was healed after prayer, and it worked like a spark in a powder keg.¹² Many of the people joined the church after being healed through prayer.¹³ In 1911, Lake asserted that he had seen 2023 confirmed healings cases during his three-year stay in the country.

Lake's basic premise and first principle was that sickness comes from Satan. God does not want anybody to be ill; illness does not glorify God. The Bible shows that illness is the result of the evil work of Satan and his demons. A second principle was that it is God's will for sick believers to be healed, a promise the Bible repeatedly emphasised. The third principle was that human faith was the condition for healing. One of the biggest reasons believers did not get healed was that they did not trust God wholeheartedly, according to the faith healers.¹⁴

Lake defined illness as the beginning of death. And death is the result of sin. For that reason, God can never become ill, like the first human beings living in the Garden of Eden. Sin changed God-men into earth-men, and sin is the parent of illness. However, where there is no sin, there is also no illness.¹⁵

(Braamfontein: Evangelie, 1987), p. 131; Jan L Langerman, 'Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa: A Revitalization of the Theological Concepts of Church Ministry' (DMin Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), p. 80; Gordon Lindsay (ed.), *Spiritual Hunger, the God-Man and Other Sermons by John G. Lake* (Dallas: Christ for the Nations, 1976), p. 23.

9 Gordon Lindsay (ed.), *The New John G. Lake Sermons* (Dallas: Christ for the Nations, 1971), p. 17.

10 Burger, *Geskiedenis van die Apostoliese Geloof Sending van Suid-Afrika*, p. 132.

11 I.G.L. Du Plessis, *Pinkster Panorama: 'n Geskiedenis van die Volle Evangelie Kerk van God in Suidelike Afrika 1910-1983'* (Pentecostal Panorama: A History of the Full Gospel Church of God in Southern Africa 1910-1983) (Irene: VEK van God, 1984), p. 40; John G. Lake, 'Dr. John G. Lake: Soos 'n Apostel na Afrika: Historiese Opwekking in Suid-Afrika' (Dr. John G. Lake: Like an Apostle to Africa: Historical Revivals in South Africa), *Pinksterboodskapper* 8.7 (1954), pp. 32-33 (33).

12 Burger, *Geskiedenis van die Apostoliese Geloof Sending van Suid-Afrika*, p. 16.

13 Burger, *Geskiedenis van die Apostoliese Geloof Sending van Suid-Afrika*, p. 178.

14 Reidt, *John G.Lake*, pp. 104-107.

15 Reidt, *John G.Lake*, p. 108.

When sickness is analysed one finds sin lurking at its back. It is not necessarily a personal sin, but it can consist of the laziness of the soul, the passivity of the Spirit or failure to study the Bible, pray, believe and practice love.¹⁶ Therefore, the right approach to disease is the same as to sin: it is something hateful to be rebuked, cast out and destroyed.¹⁷

The implication is clear: South African classical Pentecostals share a history of trust in God to heal them in response to their faith. Even today, some older members of Pentecostal churches confess that they feel guilty when they visit a medical center or use medication. Especially among indigenous members of the movement, one still finds a rejection of medical help in favor of faith in God to heal.

3 Healing Claims and Illusory Thinking

While Pentecostals expect healing to take place in response to prayer, it necessitates the question: can they prove that healing occurs when they pray in the faith that God still answers prayer? Are their claims justified when challenged in epistemological investigations? May it not just be a case of illusory thinking that, although based on the Bible, cannot be proven scientifically: that healing happens in response to prayer? David Myers refers to Henri Nouwens' acknowledgment of the human propensity to what research psychologists call 'illusory thinking'. It relates to superstitious thinking about prayer and believers' perceiving of causal connections among events that are only coincidentally correlated and that they are controlling events that are actually beyond our control. Making a perceived correlation that does not really exist is an illusory correlation. In believing that there is a relationship between the two things, one quickly notices and recalls instances that confirm that belief, reinforcing one's illusory correlation.¹⁸ Illusory correlations explain superstitious beliefs, and according to Myers, it includes the idea of an event (like healing).

He refers to research done by physician Donald Redelmeier, working with a psychologist, Amos Tversky, who specialises in what he calls 'debugging human intuition'. They followed 18 arthritis patients for 15 months, recording the patients' reports of daily temperature, humidity, pain levels and barometric

16 Gordon Lindsay (ed.), *The John G Lake Sermons on Dominion over Demons, Disease and Death* (Dallas: Christ for the Nations, 1979), p. 54.

17 Wilford H. Reidt, *Jesus: God's Way of Healing & Power to Promote Health: Featuring the Miracle Ministry of Dr. John G. Lake* (Tulsa: Harrison, 1981), p. 167.

18 See David G. Myers, *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

pressure. Several of the patients believed that the weather correlated with their discomfort, on the same day or two days earlier or later. When college students saw the columns of random numbers labeled 'arthritis pain' and 'barometric pressure', they found a direct correlation between the pain and the weather. They detected patterns that did not exist because they believed the scientific information without testing their hypotheses.¹⁹

Because we are sensitive to dramatic or unusual events, we are especially likely to notice and remember the occurrence of two such events in sequence – for instance, a premonition of an unlikely phone call followed by the call. Conversely, when the call does not follow the premonition, we are less likely to note and remember the nonevent.

Likewise, instances of people that deliberately use positive-thinking methods that are being cured of cancer impress those who believe that positive attitudes counter disease. But to assess whether positive thinking actually affects cancer, we need two more types of information. First, we need to estimate how many positive thinkers were *not* cured. Then we need to know how many people with cancer were and were not healed among those not using positive thinking. Without all these figures, the positive examples of a few tell us nothing about the actual correlation between attitudes and disease.

That is the reason why Scott Davison is skeptic about believers' claims of answered prayers. He argues that apart from direct revelation in which God explicitly reveals that the healing is a direct divine work with God intervening in the bodily processes, no one could know that God has done the healing. Because humans do not have access to direct revelation, the reasonable thing to do, according to him, is to withhold belief about whether some event is the answer to prayer.²⁰

It is probably true that some claims of healing are false. Many pastors can witness to people who responded after someone's prayer for them for healing of their deafness, only to find out that the healing did not occur as the original testimony claimed. However, Pentecostals do allow for direct, extrabiblical revelation, although it is normally an exception and should always be subjected to what the Bible teaches about the subject.

Next a short summary of the Bible's teaching regarding divine healing is given before some of the relevant empirical research into the effectiveness of prayer for healing is sketched. It is followed by a reconsideration of healing in answer to prayer, using a Pentecostal hermeneutical perspective. The

19 Myers. *The Inflated Self*, p. 113.

20 Scott Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 63.

reconsideration is necessary because the Pentecostal claim that God always heals in answer to prayer results in an inadequate theodicy that leaves believers faced with unanswered prayer in doubt about God's involvement in their lives.²¹

4 What the Bible Teaches about Prayer

Christian believers accord the Evangelists' reference to Jesus' teaching the highest authority. They find in the narratives that Jesus' ministry included many cases of healing and deliverance. The New Testament does not use the term 'miracle' that many contemporary people use to refer to events due to supernatural intervention but instead refers to 'mighty deeds' or 'deeds of power'. In the Synoptic Gospels, one finds 13 references to different healing episodes, from conditions of fever to leprosy, a withered hand, a bent back, hemorrhage, deafness, dumbness, blindness, dropsy, a severed ear, and sickness of someone near death. The early church clearly viewed Jesus as a charismatic healer, like the Jewish Hanina ben Dosa, a contemporary of Jesus, and some Pharisaic exorcists.²² When John the Baptist's disciples inquired of Jesus, at the behest of their master, whether Jesus was the expected Messiah (in Mt. 11.4–5; Lk. 7.22, and thus in Q), Jesus lists the types of healings that occur in his ministry. It includes that blind people see, the deaf hear and the lame walk again. The text clearly echoes Isa. 35.5–6; 61.1, with the prophetic expectation that the age of God's deliverance is at hand. The coming of the Spirit will introduce the new age. In stating the results of his ministry, Jesus says that it indicates the introduction of the coming age and the outpouring of the Spirit.²³ The healing ministry is the result of the divine 'power' (used in the singular to refer to one of the main activities of God) that Jesus demonstrates, most often used in the plural ('powers or appearance of different manifestations of power').²⁴

Another manifestation of divine power in Jesus' ministry is the exorcisms or deliverances he did. Mark alone has four such narratives (1.21–28; 5.1–20; 7.24–30; 9.14–29), demonstrating that Jesus casts out demons, realising the kingdom of God (Mt. 12.28; Lk. 11.20). Several summaries include exorcisms, as

21 This issue is discussed in more detail in Marius Nel, *God, Suffering, and Pentecostals* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

22 Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Surprising Relevance of a Spiritual Revolutionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 147.

23 Borg, *Jesus*, pp. 147–48.

24 Mark 14.62 even refers to God as 'power'; 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power'. In Acts 1.8, this 'power' is associated with God's Spirit.

in Mk 1.34, 39 and Lk. 6.18. Without referring to the extensive debate on exorcism among contemporary people and scholars, it is clear that in the mind of ancient people, someone can be possessed by an evil spirit or spirits by surrendering control to such a power(s). These people, and those around them, experienced that they were inhabited by a foreign presence that manifests at times. It led in some cases to a person experiencing two or more 'personalities' and exhibiting destructive or self-destructive behaviour. What is clear is that Jesus' demonstrations of power over alien forces attracted great crowds; for instance, Mk 1.32–33 relates that the 'whole city' gathered at the door of Jesus' house (see also 1.45; 4.24–25). In addition, his ministry and reputation as a healer led to his popularity among the common folk. One does not find any reference to Jesus' inability to heal anyone who sought his healing touch, even though it occurred that he had to pray twice for some healings (a text found only in Mk 8.22–26).

A popular text related to the disciples' motivation for prayer is found in Lk. 11.5–13 (Mt. 7.7–11, as part of the Sermon on the Mount). The pericope begins with the parable about the man waking his friend at midnight and requesting assistance with food after another friend arrived. Jesus argues that the friend in bed will help him because of his persistence, even though it is inconvenient. Jesus then responds by encouraging the disciples to ask, search and knock because God will certainly answer their petitions. As an evil earthly father will respond to his child's plea for food, how much more the heavenly Father knows, here in the sense of 'be versed in' or 'have practical experience of'?²⁵ The average reader probably expects to find the assurance that the Father in (literally: from, emphasising that God gives from) heaven will give good things to those who ask him to give, as Mt. 7.11 does. However, Lk. 11.13 explains that the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Robert H. Stein thinks that Luke's words are closer to Jesus' exact words and that it reveals Luke's theological emphasis. Luke argues that the excellent gift that God can give God's children is *par excellence* was the Spirit, who brings a partial realisation of God's kingdom.²⁶ Believers receive the gift through prayer, underlining the importance of prayer in Lukan thinking.

Matthew relates that the event of Jesus' teaching takes place at a much earlier period of Jesus' ministry. However, the difference between the words reported by Matthew and Luke is more important. Matthew uses the more general expression, 'good things', instead of the 'Holy Spirit'. What occurs in

25 J. Reiling and J.L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke* (UBS Handbook Series, New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), p. 436.

26 Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (The New American Commentary 24; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), p. 328.

both accounts is the assurance that the Father would hear and grant prayers if believers persist in asking, trusting God, and on condition that the thing prayed for must be something 'good' in the eyes of the heavenly Father, the all-important limitation.²⁷ The message that God hears and answers prayer is confirmed in several other Scripture. From the Gospels one finds such references in, for example, Mt. 21.22; Jn 14.13-14; 15.7; 15.16, and 16.22-24. In the rest of the New Testament, one thinks of verses such as Rom. 10.12; Eph. 3.12, 30; Heb. 4.16; Jas 1.5; 5.16; 1 Pet. 3.12 and 1 Jn 5.14-15. In the Old Testament the same viewpoint is emphasised by, for example, 1 Kgs 3.5 in relation to Solomon (see also Job 22.27; 33.26; Pss. 34.3-5; 65.2; 91.15; 138.3; 145.18; Jer. 29.12; 33.3; 36.7, and Zech. 13.9). The Bible seemingly teaches that God answers believers' prayers, although there are clearly a few exceptions to the rule, of which Job's narrative is the most prominent.

5 Empirical Research about the Effectiveness of Prayer

Many Christians long for scientific proof of the efficacy of prayer to prove their point of divine intervention in response to believing prayer. In an article in *The New York Times* of 2006, Benedict Carey asserts that since at least 1872 experiments carried out to determine the efficacy of intercessory prayer for healing, prayer and intercessory prayer had no discernible effects.²⁸ However, not all research projects reached the same conclusions.

On the one hand, a study published in 1988 by Randolph Byrd relates that research among 393 patients with severe coronary problems admitted to San Francisco General Hospital relates that approximately half of the patients were prayed for by practicing Christian believers while the other half received no prayer. The researcher asked three to seven intercessors to pray for the first group, providing them with the first names, diagnosis, patients' condition and some occasional updates. The group testifying of prayers being offered for them significantly outscored the control group. In another project reported in *Fox News* in February 2019, Kent Ingle also implies that science has proved that prayer has power and works, providing positive physiological effects.²⁹ He

27 H.D.M. Spence-Jones (ed.), *St. Luke, The Pulpit Commentary* (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), I, p. 302.

28 Benedict Carey, 'Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer', *New York Times* 31 (March 2006). <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/health/longawaited-medical-study-questions-the-power-of-prayer.html> accessed 2022-02-26.

29 Kent Ingle, 'The Power of Prayer: Science Proves it Works, has Positive Physiological Effects,' *Fox News Channel*, 12 February 2019. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/>

argues that prayer, like Buddhist meditation or yoga's breathing techniques, focuses on the mind and aligns the body with the mind, leading to detectable lower cortisol levels and improved oxygen utilisation. For that reason, medical faculties at various universities incorporated patient spirituality into their curriculum. However, that does not imply that prayer is efficient in providing healing.

On the other hand, Gregory and Christopher Fung, writing for *Christianity Today*, wrote on 15 May 2009 that intercessory prayer may actually hurt patients instead of helping them. They also refer to the first such study in 1872 by English polymath Francis Galton, nephew of Charles Darwin, that found no statistical evidence that prayer prolonged life or reduced stillbirths.³⁰ That study, however, does not meet the required scientific criteria of our day.³¹ David Meyers relates how the publication of the research results elicited a national 'prayer-gauge controversy' that raged in Britain during 1872–1873.³²

Chittaranjan Andrade and Rajiv Radhakrishnan discuss existing research about the healing powers of prayer in triple-blind, randomised controlled trials.³³ They note that published intercessory prayer studies are characterised by their limitation in addressing only soft diagnoses with soft outcomes. They do not find any research into the efficacy of prayer for severe illnesses like the disappearance of, for example, medically proven tumours and metastases, reversal of traumatic paraplegia, or revival from a state of brain death, wound healing or successful pregnancy. They acknowledge the possibility of the existence of a divine being. Still, they argue that randomised controlled studies or any form of scientific inquiry cannot be applied to the study of the efficacy of prayer in healing for various reasons. They argue that the aim of science is not to open the door to faith as a different means of acquiring 'knowledge', in this case about the infinite God, but to limit infinite error, a view originally attributed to Galileo Galilei.³⁴

the-power-of-prayer-science-proves-it-works-has-positive-physiological-effects; accessed 2022-02-26.

30 Found in Francis Galton, 'Statistical Inquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer', *Fortnightly Review* 12 (1872), pp. 125–35.

31 Gregory Fung and Christopher Fung, 'What do Prayer Studies Prove', 15 May 2009. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/may/what-do-prayer-studies-prove.html>; accessed 2022-02-26.

32 David G. Myers, 'Is Prayer Clinically Effective?', *Reformed Review* 53.2 (2000), pp. 95–102.

33 Chittaranjan Andrade and Rajiv Radhakrishnan, 'Prayer and Healing: A Medical and Scientific Perspective on Randomized Controlled Trials', *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 51.4 (2009), pp. 247–53.

34 In, *inter alia*, Skrabanek Petr, 'Demarcation of the Absurd', *Lancet* 327.1 (1986), pp. 960–61.

In a similar article summarising existing empirical studies of Christian prayer since 1872, John Finney and Newton Malony comment on such research reports' small number and their limited substantial conclusions.³⁵ The studies, they suggest, find empirical grounds for considering verbal petitionary prayer as more than just a neurotic flight from anxiety. However, verbal intercessory and reflective prayer is probably ineffective in reducing anxiety. On the other hand, vocal positive petitionary prayer forms an effective core for group therapy. However, in contrast to Andrade and Radhakrishnan, they argue the need for further empirical investigation of prayer, suggesting the study of the motives, differential effects of the various kinds, psychological processes active in prayer, the effects and impact of prayer on religiosity and spiritual development, and the relationship of Christian prayer to prayer of the other major world religions. As a core religious practice, it requires more research by psychologists of religion in cooperation with theologians.

David Meyers also asks whether prayer is clinically effective and concludes that people of faith and nonbelievers have reason to be skeptical about efforts to test and calibrate the effects of intercessory prayer.³⁶ First, he explains that the prayer concept being tested by researchers is more akin to magic than to a biblical understanding of prayer to an omniscient and sovereign God. His view of the divine includes that God as the ground of all being and author of the universe does not work in the gaps of what is incomprehensible to human beings. God rather works in and through nature, including medicine. Believers acknowledge their dependence on God for their basic necessities, but that does not imply that God is a celestial vending machine who is activated by prayers. They accept that God knows about their needs and cares for them, but they do not attempt to force God's hand. A second reason is that in populations where most people profess to be Christians, most patients will be the beneficiaries of prayers while many of them remain ill or die, probably the same as in non-Christian countries. If prayer proved effectively, it implies that pray-ers can force and even manipulate God to serve their interests. For that reason, C.S. Lewis said that any effort to prove prayer employing empirical proof is impossible and will remain so as a spiritual necessity to keep believers from becoming magicians or wizards.³⁷ Myer's last reason is that historical evidence suggests that prayers cannot manipulate God, as seen in the droughts,

35 John R. Finney and H. Newton Malony, 'Empirical Studies of Christian Prayer: A Review of the Literature', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 13.2 (1985), pp. 104–115.

36 David G. Myers, 'Is Prayer Clinically Effective?', *Reformed Review* 53.2 (2000), pp. 95–102.

37 C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 215.

floods, hurricanes, and plagues that characterise human history. He refers to the unanswered prayers of biblical figures like Job, Jesus, and Paul.

Fred Rosner concludes his comprehensive study by stating that no scientific study has yet satisfactorily proved the efficacy of prayer.³⁸ He then asks the vital question of whether the efficacy of prayer must be scientifically established. He argues that believers will not change their praying habits when it can be conclusively proved that prayer is not efficient because their habit is grounded in the convictions of faith in divine providence. They read their religious sources and base their faith on these sources, convinced of the Bible's truth. Francis Galton in his much-discussed article has already concluded in a similar vein by stating that his negative remarks about the efficacy of prayer do not include questioning the value of prayer for human beings.³⁹ For instance, he argues that the utterance of prayer relieves the minds of many believing human beings. Galton refers to a mother that has lost her child, finding relief in prayer and trust in God. He acknowledges that many persons of high intellectual gifts and critical minds commune with God as an axiomatic certainty that the divine being listens and responds to them. They certainly know that one cannot establish good criteria to distinguish between internal and external sources of conviction. Still, they have experienced how a confident sense of communion with God strengthens them.⁴⁰

The following section will argue that Pentecostals' epistemology is based not on scientific proof of its correctness but their charismatic experiences of divine intervention in their lives, beginning with their conversion experience and continuing in charismatic encounters with the Holy Spirit.

6 Pentecostal Responses to Objections about Credibility of Answered Prayers

Many of the Christians who believe that God answers prayers for healing base their belief in the Bible as God's revealed word. It was shown that there is a clear teaching that God still heals, although there are exceptions. However, Pentecostal hermeneutics creates the room to expect healing not only because

38 Fred Rosner, 'The Efficacy of Prayer: Scientific vs Religious Evidence', *Journal of Religion and Health* 14.4 (1975), pp. 294–98. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27505317>.

39 Galton, 'Statistical Inquiries', p. 134.

40 Galton, 'Statistical Inquiries', p. 135.

the Bible teaches that God still heals but because believers still experience healing in answer to prayer in their own and others' lives.

The hermeneutical journey of Pentecostals has been described several times.⁴¹ Early Pentecostals had not enjoyed a grounded theological training and initially it led to an anti-intellectualist stance that resulted in their hermeneutical presuppositions to function mostly unconsciously and uncritically. Today, most Pentecostals accept that scholarship, especially the unique perspectives of Pentecostal scholarship, significantly influence the way Pentecostals theologise.

However, not all naïve Bible reading practices ceased since most members and pastors (frequently untrained or less qualified) still function in a bibliocist-literalist manner. Like conservative Evangelicals with whom they alliances since the 1930s and 1940s, they accept the Bible as the word of God, implying that all terms and texts are placed on the same level and given the same authority ascribed to because it is presumed to be inspired by the Spirit. As a result, it reads the Bible without considering its historical and social contexts. It also ignores the genre of the specific passage or the authors' original intention, as far as it can be distinguished.

The Bible is as a single unified narrative of the redemption plan summarised in an emphasis on Pentecostals' Full Gospel view of a dynamic Christ

41 See, for example, Kenneth J. Archer, *Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture, and Community* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture, and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT, 2009); Jacqueline N. Grey, *Three's A Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics and the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Mathew S. Clark and Henry I. Lederle, *What Is Distinctive about Pentecostal Theology?* (Miscellanea Specialia 1, UNISA; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989); Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016); Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT, 1993); Marius Nel, *An African Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Distinctive Contribution to Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019); Bradley T. Noel, 'Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact' (DTh Dissertation, University of South Africa, 2007); L. William Oliverio, *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition: A Typological Account* (Global and Pentecostal Studies 12; Leiden: Brill, 2012); Harlyn G. Purdy, *A Distinct Twenty-First Century Pentecostal Hermeneutic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015); Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostalism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); John W. Wyckoff, *Pneuma and Logos: The Role of the Spirit in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010); Amos Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017); Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

the Savior, Spirit Baptiser, Sanctifier, Divine Healer, and coming King. Their continuationist Christology presupposes that Christ still saves, delivers, heals, and baptises in the Spirit, as described in biblical accounts, in contrast to many Protestants with their cessations viewpoint. As one grand unified story, they read the Bible as though all texts function on the same plane and with the same authority, interpreting it inter- and intratextually without leaving room for possible different contexts, intentions of authors or genres. That provided them with the means to find themes related to the charismatic work of the Spirit in nearly every book of the Bible. Where it was difficult to find such 'hidden' meanings, they used analogy, anagogy, allegory, and typology to interpret the texts.⁴² Their interpretation consisted mainly of tracing hidden, spiritual meanings in the text.⁴³

However, another hermeneutical tradition has been developing among Pentecostal scholars since the 1980s and 1990s. It is based on some premises that early Pentecostals used in their Bible-reading practices as well. Rosinag Gabaitse refers to it as an articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics, in contrast to the older unarticulated hermeneutics that influenced the movement since the 1940s.⁴⁴ The unarticulated hermeneutics is found in the way most Pentecostals view God and the Bible and their songs, sermons, prayers, and testimonies.

The articulated Pentecostal worldview and hermeneutics exist within the tension between the 'rational and cognitive' and 'affective and experiential, according to Margaret Poloma'.⁴⁵ It led to the development of an epistemology based on the experiential charismatic orientation of Pentecostals, an approach seen as vitally necessary to all Bible-reading practices.⁴⁶ The epistemology can be characterised as mysticism, defined as 'experiential knowledge of God' or (in Latin) *cognitio Dei experimentalis*. God exists as an experiential reality for them; they have first-hand understanding of God.⁴⁷ Their experience is, in William James's terms, a non-ordinary state of consciousness marked above all by a sense of union and illumination, of reconnecting and seeing anew.⁴⁸

42 'Anagogy' refers to a way of interpreting the Bible in a mystical, spiritual fashion that finds allusions to themes that interest the reader in texts without any such references.

43 John W. McKay 'When the Veil is Taken Away: The Impact of Prophetic Experience on Biblical Interpretation,' in Lee Roy Martin (ed.), *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 57–80 (63).

44 Rosinag Mmannana Gabaitse, 'Toward an African Pentecostal Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic of Liberation: Interpreting Acts 2:1–47 in the Context of Botswana' (DPhil Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012), p. 77.

45 Margaret M. Poloma, *Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 8.

46 Grey, *Three's a Crowd*, p. 15.

47 Borg, *Jesus*, p. 132.

48 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 320 fn. 328.

Because they emphasise the experiential, their doctrines do not consist of abstract dogmatist speculations. First, they experience encounters with the Spirit. Following the charismatic encounters, they develop a spiritual sense, in the words of Christopher G. Woznicki, making it possible for them to perceive God and divine actions in a manner that is, mysteriously, akin to our other perceptions and analogous to our spiritual senses.⁴⁹ Spiritual perceptions may consist of the perception of a non-religious object or an unusual public object as the action of God, or sensations ascribed to a spiritual experiences, or a religious experience not describable by normal vocabulary or experiencing the 'sense' that God is directing the believer.⁵⁰ Believers cannot prove that the spiritual sense is the result of the work of the Spirit but requires no need to prove it because they 'know' it, just as they 'know' in a fist-handed manner that God exists. When backed up by what Scripture teaches and resulting in 'answered prayer', they ascribe it to God. Then from these living facts, they testify of their experiences, based on the concepts they saw in the Bible's descriptions of similar incidents. Lastly, they develop an accompanying theology to categorise their charismatic experiences. One implication is that their theology is open-ended; it allows for elements to change because doctrinal 'truths' are not absolute. It can constantly be and is in time challenged and overturned. They do not emphasise theology and teaching but rather the necessity of experiencing God in person in charismatic encounters. They stand in a direct relationship with God that can hold many surprises and even lead to extrabiblical revelations.⁵¹ In other words, they base their hermeneutics not primarily on cognition but life-transforming comprehension, based on biblical precedent. The charismatic encounter always contains an element of mystery because the acting agent in the encounter remains a mystery to human beings. Divine mysteries by their very nature so far exceed our created intellect and imagination that even though God communicates with us by revelation and we receive it by faith, they remain covered by a veil of faith, as though shrouded in darkness.⁵²

49 Christopher G. Woznicki, 'Did God Answer That Prayer? Spiritual Perception and the Epistemology of Petitionary Prayer', *Pneuma* 43 (2021), pp. 115–33 (120).

50 Woznicki refers to Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn 2014), p. 300 that gives this fivefold categorisation of spiritual senses. Woznicki ('Did God Answer That Prayer?', p. 122) adds that mental impressions, physiological impressions, or having Scripture been brought to mind also fall within the experience of Pentecostals.

51 Scott A. Ellington, 'Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 (1996), pp. 16–38 (17).

52 M. John Farrelly, *The Trinity: Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 283.

As a result, Kenneth Archer emphasises a combination of orthodoxy and ortho-pathy, implying that beliefs should be supported by the daily praxis and evaluated in terms of ortho-praxis.⁵³ Its theory does not proceed to provide the foundational rationale for practice, as is true of much of the Western philosophical tradition. Instead, the theory is the reflective moment in praxis following on the experience that unites them into the same activity. As for early Pentecostals, praxis should also be informed by empathic involvement with the fate of the poor, marginalised, challenged and rejected people of society.⁵⁴ Pentecostalism justifies its existence as resistance against what it perceives as the cold, creedal and cerebral Christianity of many Christian churches that do not care for sinners and poor, hurting people.

Another presupposition is the acknowledgment of the significant influence of the Spirit in the life of the church and believers, viewed as the continuation of Jesus' ministry (Jn 14.18–19). For that reason, the resource of the books of Luke–Acts forms the *locus classicus* of their theology, especially narratives about the outpouring of the Spirit. The Spirit's continued work, they believe, is manifested in their charismatic experiences.⁵⁵

They live in biblical narratives and use their terms and images to verbalise their own charismatic experiences. In that way, they 'enter' the biblical events, reading the Bible as though from the inside out. Descriptions of biblical events start to shape their expectations when they encounter God. And the Bible shapes their religious language and worldview, influencing their daily life. Truth consists of charismatic personal encounters, as long as they conform to biblical evidence of similar experiences.⁵⁶ As a result, they live in the miraculous world presupposed by biblical events.

As a result of what they see in the lives of the prophets in the Old Testament and the early church, they expect and experience extrabiblical divine revelation, extending their concept of theological truth. Like believers in biblical times, they expect healing and deliverance to take place in response to their prayers driven by faith. Rickie Moore describes it as an 'inseparable interplay between knowledge and lived experience, where knowing about God and

53 Kenneth J. Archer, 'Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology: Method and Manner', 9.3 (2007), pp. 301–14 (309).

54 Archer, 'Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology', p. 310.

55 Steven M. Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 53–54.

56 Kenneth J. Archer, 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect', in Lee Roy Martin (ed.), *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 131–48 (132) calls the supernaturalistic worldview underlying the Pentecostal movement the very reason for its overwhelming growth.

directly experiencing God perpetually inform each other and depend upon one another'.⁵⁷ They understand God by the divine engagement with and on behalf of believers.⁵⁸

The immediacy of encounters with God through the Spirit also determines how they see the Bible and it is reflected in how they interpret the Bible. Their experiences serve as *Vorverständnis* or pre-understanding, analysing what they read of events in the Bible in the light of how they experienced God in their charismatic events. The Bible serves as the primary means to understand what God still wants to accomplish in believers' lives, including that Jesus is the Healer.

7 Conclusion

For that reason, when asked on what Pentecostals base their perception that their healing was the result of God, they would probably explain that it was based on the one hand on biblical evidence. The Bible teaches that God heals. On the other hand, it is based on the certainty that it was God's work based on their charismatic encounter with the Spirit that convinced them that it was a divine work of healing they experienced. When confronted with the statement that it is impossible to explain healing in scientific terms, they would respond that they cannot prove the existence of God in scientific terms as well but that they know that God exists because God is a living reality for them. They cannot argue with their experiences with God, based on their spiritual senses

Lastly, Pentecostals should also be honest and admit that some prayers are not answered. When believers pray, for example, for emotional healing of uncontrolled responses to anger and frustration they may find that God rather intended them to take control of their emotions. Or they may pray to be healed of obesity while God intended them to discipline their eating habits in line with the discipline they need to serve God consistently. Believers should also realise that not all prayers are answered, including those directed at healing, and it should encourage them to pray further in order to find out what God's further will for them is. Perhaps God intends them, for example, to change their lifestyle that will lead to better health as a condition for the healing to take place. At times God does not take responsibility for us because

57 Rickie D. Moore, 'A Pentecostal Approach to Scripture', in Lee Roy Martin (ed.), *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 11–13 (12).

58 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), p. 125.

it is expected of us to do so ourselves. In other words, prayer must be accompanied by cooperation of the pray-er and a willingness to be engaged in the answer to the prayer, if needed.⁵⁹ Or they may pray for inner healing of memories to find out that God is leading them on the road of forgiveness of those who abused them in the past, as a condition for healing them. The prayer for healing should always take place in the spirit of cooperating with God in the healing process. In some cases, believers' behaviour may hinder their prayers, for instance, when they live in unresolved conflict due to an unwillingness to forgive, lack compassion for the poor (Prov. 21.13) or their prayers are centered on their own pleasures (Jas 4.3).⁶⁰ However, when they pray for forgiveness, to know God better, wisdom, strength to obey and serve God or for the spread of the gospel they may pray with the confidence that God promised in the Bible to answer their prayers.⁶¹

59 Stanley Grenz, *Prayer: The Cry of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 2005), p. 62.

60 Woznicki, 'Did God Answer That Prayer?', p. 130.

61 J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016).