

Miracles are not immoral: a response to James Keller's moral argument against miracles

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Abstract. James Keller recently argued that miracles in the sense of divine intervention are immoral because in such acts God would unfairly choose to help the beneficiary of the miracle over others who may be equally in need and just as deserving. I respond generally by arguing that his analysis overlooks the possibility that those who do not receive the miraculous intervention may receive other benefits of equal or greater value and that there may be purposes for miraculous intervention which transcend individual benefit. More specifically, I argue that Keller's understanding of miracles does not accommodate the Christian doctrine of grace, that he does not come to grips with the evangelical purpose of miracles depicted in Christian apologetics, that his view of the context in which miracles occur is abstract and sterile in light of charismatic experience, and finally that his argument leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that the Resurrection of Christ is somehow immoral. In the light of these considerations, I argue that miracles are not immoral.

Arguments against belief in miracles have been prominent in the literature of religious philosophy since the publication of Hume's *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. These attacks have almost uniformly concerned the credibility of such belief, i.e., whether a reasonable person should accept reports of miracles, and have concluded with Hume that it is always more likely that the report is for some reason false than that the miracle occurred. James Keller has recently published a different kind of critique, one that recalls the arguments of certain eighteenth-century deists, Keller maintaining that belief in miracles should be rejected for moral reasons.¹ Though I sympathize with the project of moral criticism and see readily how it should be applied to various scriptural claims and ecclesiastical doctrines and practices, I would like to argue that there is no good moral reason to reject belief in miracles.

~~To be sure, there is a moral concern about miracles very close to his issue which I think to be altogether appropriate, and that is concern over the nature of reporting miracles. Keller notes an excellent article by Lewis Smedes, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, in which Smedes expresses doubts about the charismatic experiences in the~~

¹ James Keller 'A moral argument against miracles', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995), 54–78. Since there will be numerous references to this article, I shall note it by inserting the relevant page numbers parenthetically into my own text.

'Signs and Wonders' course which attracted considerable attention at Fuller during the eighties. He recounts his 'nagging anxiety' about 'touting miraculous healings', even an 'uneasy feeling' regarding the 'fittingness, even the decency', of celebrating the miraculous healing of a few ailments in a world full of suffering.² These worries are very much on target. Insofar as miracles are touted with a sense of pride by the recipient or perhaps those who prayed for the recipient, surely the message that is sent to others who also sought miraculous healing but did not receive it is that they were somehow unworthy. And that is indeed immoral. Celebration of miracles is a natural reaction and is in some contexts appropriate, but it must be done with care and sensitivity.

The Keller concern is close to that of Smedes but also significantly different. His target is the morality of miracles per se, not the nature of miracle reports, and his charge is that belief in miracles as they are commonly understood is intrinsically immoral, however they are reported.³

It is important to be clear about Keller's project from the beginning. He accepts a modern understanding of miracles as 'temporary suspensions of one or more laws of nature accomplished by divine power' (54), a view which was put forward by Hume and which arises from the interplay of Newtonian science and Protestant rationalism. The critique does not apply, then, to the idea of miracles as beneficial coincidences of natural events, or to the idea of miracles as natural events *seen as* acts of God. For an event to count as a miracle for Keller, it must involve divine initiative and it must violate natural law.

The basic charge that he makes throughout the article is that miracles so construed attribute actions to God that are unfair because 'they imply that God takes the initiative in doing for one person something qualitatively different from what God does for others in a similar condition' (58).

Before articulating Keller's argument further, I want to comment on its basic presupposition, namely, that God must be fair in treatment of different individuals. This view, of course, is not without opposition. Those Christian thinkers who defend a special revelation unavailable to non-Christians or who put forward a doctrine of exclusive salvation through Christ often claim as well that God is not bound to human constructs pertaining to fairness. Christian philosophers who support a strong form of the divine command theory of ethics will answer Euthyphro's question by saying that something

² The Smede article is a powerful ethical reflection on the Fuller experiment. The article was published in *The Reformed Journal*, 39 (1989), 14–21. A more complete analysis from the review committee of which Smedes was a member was published under the title *Ministry and the Miraculous: A Case Study at Fuller Theological Seminary* (Waco, Texas: Word Press, 1987).

³ Keller says early on that his argument 'does not claim that all miracles' are morally problematic and that he is concerned only with a 'rather common' view of their 'purpose, location, and obviousness' (54). He allows, however, that given the difficulty of any other plausible account of miracles, his argument will 'pose a challenge for anyone who believes that miracles have occurred' (54–55).

~~is pious, or in our case fair, only because God makes it so, and that the will of God thus transcends human distinctions between fair and unfair treatment. In addition, of course, predestinarian theologians will make the counterintuitive argument that God owes salvation to no one, so the arbitrary selection of some is not morally problematic.~~

~~Despite these kinds of objections to the assumption, it seems to me that Keller is on solid footing in accepting it. In the interest of a clear exposition of his argument, however, I will postpone explicit discussion of the issue to my closing remarks and at this point simply accept the requirement of fair treatment in divine action as an undefended but entirely appropriate presupposition.~~

Keller distinguishes two general purposes for miracles. Some, in his words, are ‘epistemic’ and others ‘practical’. The former are divine actions intended to reveal a truth to someone or perhaps to certify the revelatory claims of another. The latter are divine actions intended to confer other kinds of benefits such as healings, the preservation of life, or even satisfaction of less significant personal desires. In both cases, the charge of unfairness is leveled. Keller asks the obvious sceptical question why one person receives the revelation rather than another, or why one receives the advantage of a certification not provided to others. And even more pointedly, why would God save one person and not another in similar circumstances (61–70)?

He makes a further distinction between ‘obvious’ and ‘inferred’ miracles. The former are events thought by someone to be possible only if a known law is violated. A description of the event would be logically inconsistent with a statement of the relevant law. The latter are events with an unusual and beneficial outcome which are thought by someone to be possible violations of natural law, but the person assessing the event has inadequate knowledge of science to say specifically what law was violated. In this situation, someone infers the likelihood of an inconsistency, but is unable to make it explicit (55–58). In both contexts, Keller objects to miracles as unfair. On the ‘inferred’ variety, he complains about the ‘total absence of any pattern in the alleged miracles’ (56). It is not only believers, for instance, but also unbelievers who have what appear to be miraculous recoveries from serious illnesses such as cancer. Further, it is not just those for whom prayers are offered who recover, and many for whom prayers are offered do not recover. Since the believer is not sure in such cases whether a miracle has really occurred, to attribute some unexpected recoveries but not others to the intervention of God seems arbitrary (57). On ‘obvious’ miracles, the problem is even more apparent. Keller points out that in cases involving a clear-cut inconsistency with natural law and results consistent with divine purposes, there should be uniform judgments on the part of believers that a miracle has occurred. But this is not the case. Instead, some of these cases are thought of as miracles by believers but others are simply ignored. To at-

tribute some of these events but not others to God while all satisfy the relevant criteria for being miracles is again arbitrary (58).⁴

I would like to respond to this critique in several ways. First, it overlooks the mystery and grace of the Christian tradition while opting for a mechanical and sterile understanding of divine action. Second, it fails to appreciate the role of miracles in Christian apologetics. Third, the charge of arbitrariness is based on an empirically inaccurate account of the relations among belief, prayer, and recovery. Fourth, Keller gives inadequate treatment to the connection between miracle and 'special task'. Fifth, and finally, the critique implies that the Resurrection of Christ is immoral, a view that is difficult to sustain. At the very least, it should be noted at the beginning that the moral argument is thus attacking a core Christian doctrine, indeed one that has provided inspiration for the virtues of faith and hope for believers.

First, Keller's moral argument against miracles sounds very much like a Kantian account of grace, surely the most legalistic that has ever been produced. Keller's basic presupposition for the constant charge of arbitrariness is the very legitimate view that similar persons ought to be treated similarly. It should be pointed out, however, that to treat similar persons similarly does not imply that the same benefit be conferred on each at the same time. ~~On this latter understanding, spiritual healing would be a matter of merit. A and B are both seriously ill, for example, and both have been good persons. If God chooses to heal one, then the other must be healed also. But the scriptural tradition is in complete opposition to such a view. Desert is never mentioned in regard to the various accounts there. It is true that sometimes miracles are related to a special ministry, but it is arguable in these cases that the purpose is more to empower the mission than to provide a benefit to the one who receives the miracle, a theme to be explored later. And sometimes the miracle is related to compassion, but it is primarily that of the miracle worker as is seen in the healings of Jesus.~~

~~One might point out also that faith is often mentioned in connection with the biblical miracles. On occasion, it is the faith of the recipient, as when Jesus says to the woman who touched his garment and was healed, 'Your faith has made you well' (Matthew 9:22, NRSV). On other occasions, it is the faith of one who cares about the recipient, as when Jesus says of the Roman centurion who sought healing for his servant, 'In no one in Israel have I found such faith' (Matthew 8:10, NRSV). Indeed, according to the gospel writers, Jesus explicitly related faith to miracles, 'All things can be done for the one who believes' (Mark 9:23, NRSV). So, the argument might be made that in the scriptural tradition it is faith that serves as the criterion~~

⁴ Though the problems noted by Keller in his discussion of both 'obvious' and 'inferred' miracles are important to the debate, I do not see that the distinction itself does any work. In both cases the problem is really identical. All events identified as miracles involve an inference from an apparent inconsistency with natural law to the conclusion that God must have caused it.

for desert; in other words, those with the most faith will receive a miracle and others will not.

In response, we should remember that despite the emphasis on faith in some miracle accounts, for the most part it is not mentioned in these contexts. The most prominent of the miracle stories in the gospels, the feeding of the five thousand, is a case in point. Here the faith of Jesus seems to be contrasted with the doubt of the disciples; but nothing is said in any of the accounts regarding the faith of the crowd who benefited from the act.⁵ In addition, of course, even if the faith of recipients were always the crucial consideration, from a biblical perspective it still would not be the case that miracles are somehow deserved by those with great faith but not deserved by others. We should remember that as Paul develops the doctrine throughout his writings, faith is put in contrast to works, the latter but not the former being a merit-based criterion for the blessing of God.

Moreover, the doctrine of election, however it is interpreted, implies that at least part of the reason for the status of Israel in the Hebrew Bible or the Church in the New Testament is the unmerited selection of God for a particular purpose. Israel was selected to be a unique and holy people, for the ultimate purpose of being a light to the nations. The Church is construed by Paul and other New Testament writers as the elect people of God, called to be witnesses to the revelation in Christ. The doctrine is complicated, and surely works are relevant to the elect status in both conditions. But the biblical testimony is firm that works by themselves are insufficient. The free, elective act of God transcends a merit-based criterion. By Keller's view, it would be simply immoral for God to choose Israel or for Christ to say to his disciples, 'You did not choose me, but I have chosen you' (John 15:16, NRSV).

Keller deals with this kind of objection but in a totally inadequate way. He adduces a family situation in which the parent gives 'different but equal goods' to two children. Keller correctly points out that in such a situation the parent would still be treating similar people similarly because the goods are equal. Then he attaches a hopeless provision: 'I am assuming that the goods which believers have seen as conferred in a miracle on one person are typically not matched by an equal good conferred on another who is not the recipient of a miraculous benefit' (59).⁶ There is simply no way by which such an assumption could be known. In all cases of the miraculous, it may be that those who did not receive the miracle received other gifts just as great.

⁵ This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. There are obvious theological motifs involved, especially in the Johannine account where Jesus' act is a sign of his messianic role; but faith is significant here only in that the disciples do not have enough to see a solution whereas Jesus does.

⁶ Keller says that this crucial assumption will be defended later, but his defence consists only in giving an account of various kinds of benefits conferred (his 'epistemic' and 'practical' miracles), not in establishing the relation required for his charge of unfairness.

Keller continues with the family example. To the challenge that it would not be unfair for a parent to give a gift to one child but not to another who is loved equally, he responds, 'Perhaps not, provided what is given is a gift and not something needed' (59). If the gift is needed, he says, 'it does seem to me unfair (or unloving) to give it to only one' (59). But this rejoinder will not do any better than the one above. In the first place, most parents would be hard put to distinguish gift and need. Indeed, many of us give items which are primarily and directly designed to satisfy a need. And again, parents are moved to sympathy with the need of one or another of their children at different times and in different ways. A family in which there is love would not be set up in the mechanical way pictured by Keller. Rather, when a gift is given to one child, a part of the larger moral experience for the family is for everyone to appreciate it and encourage the recipient to feel good about it. The virtue of unselfishness is cultivated in children precisely through such experiences.

The upshot of this first complaint is that it is possible for God to treat similar persons similarly and still confer a unique and undeserved benefit to one and not the other. To insist on the same benefit at the same time is too legalistic, requiring more than equal treatment implies.

A second reason to oppose Keller's position is that it overlooks the role of miracle for Christian apologetics. This approach cannot be incorporated without qualification for it often assumes an exclusive view of truth for the Christian revelation. I do not wish to endorse such a view, preferring instead either an inclusivist understanding along the lines of Karl Rahner or a pluralist view as developed by John Hick. I believe that even with these more liberal assumptions about revelation, however, that the apologetic tradition still makes a very important point about the way in which miracles might function.

From the biblical period to the present time, miracles have been construed by apologists as having a purpose beyond the benefit received by the one for whom the miracle is performed. Miracles serve, they have argued, to authenticate the Christian message by demonstrating the authority of those who proclaim it. This can be seen, for instance, in the gospels as Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive the sins of a paralytic man by healing him (Mark 2:1–12). And when the disciples of John the Baptist are sent to inquire whether Jesus is the Messiah, he responds by making direct reference to his miraculous works. 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them' (Matthew 11:2–6, NRSV). The early Christian *kerygma* of the Acts of the Apostles clearly indicates a similar relation. Paul in Athens, for instance, authenticates the Christian message specifically by the Resurrection. 'Of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31, NRSV). Indeed, the Resurrection of Christ is for Paul the basis for

our belief that we shall also be raised (1 Corinthians 15:12–20), a point to be explored later.

The argument from miracles was incorporated into Christian preaching and writing throughout the first centuries of the Church's existence. In his *City of God*, for instance, Augustine says, 'Miracles were necessary before the world believed, in order that it might believe'.⁷ The enlightened thinkers of his day would never have accepted the Resurrection has it not been attested by 'corroborating miraculous signs'.⁸ The miracles of the Christian martyrs testify to their faith.⁹ And the continuing miracles even of this day, he points out in *On the Trinity*, though not as numerous or significant as those of the New Testament, argue for the authority of the Catholic Church.¹⁰

In the modern period, this argument did not disappear. John Locke, for instance, in his little-studied works *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *On Miracles*, makes the standard apologetic move of basing the credibility of the Christian faith on its miracles. Indeed, Locke goes so far as to argue that Christianity is proved superior to other religions through the number and power of its miracles.¹¹ George Park Fisher writes that even through most of the nineteenth century miracles were crucial to Christian apologetics, 'It was the evidence from miracles which the defenders of Christianity principally relied on'.¹² And in the middle of the twentieth century, Alan Richardson reaffirms the traditional role of miracles in his *Christian Apologetics*: 'The classical position in Christian theology was that a supra-rational revelation must be attested by supernatural truth'.¹³ He notes that many of his contemporaries in theology played down the miraculous, asking instead that the faith be accepted essentially based on its moral or theological content, bereft of the supernatural. In Richardson's view this will not do. 'The traditional Christian theology was right in holding that to ask a man to believe in a divine revelation and to show him no signs of its miraculous character would be to treat him as something less than a rational being'.¹⁴ Divine attestation through miracles has been at the heart of the gospel from the beginning.¹⁵

The apologetic use of miracles has found its way into contemporary Christian philosophy as well. Richard Swinburne's discussion of the role of miracles provides a fine example. According to Swinburne, occasional miracles are an attestation of the character of God. A deity who never intervened

⁷ Augustine *City of God*, bk. 22, ch. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

¹⁰ Augustine *On the Trinity* bk. 3, ch. 10.

¹¹ John Locke 'A discourse of miracles', in I. T. Ramsey (ed.) *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 83. Locke's position is especially clear in the following quotation: 'So likewise the number, variety and greatness of the miracles, wrought for the confirmation of the doctrine delivered by Jesus Christ, carry with them such strong marks of an extraordinary divine power, that the truth of his mission will stand firm and unquestionable, till any one rising up in opposition to him shall do greater miracles than he and his apostles did' (83).

¹² George Park Fisher *The Grounds of Theistic and Christian Belief* rev. edn. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 174.

¹³ Alan Richardson *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 163.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

would have insufficient care for the creation. And one who intervened habitually would undermine the natural laws upon which we depend for the consistency of our experience.¹⁶ Occasional miracles assist us in such a way as to preserve the consistency of our experience and to enable us to develop morally. And they reveal the character of God as loving.¹⁷

Even more directly, he argues in *Faith and Reason* that the Resurrection should be construed as a miraculous act of God which shows that ‘the sacrificial life of Jesus had not ended a disaster’.¹⁸ It became the means of founding the Christian Church, providing a ‘divine signature’ or ‘the divine judgment that it is good that the teachings of Jesus triumph’.¹⁹ The incarnation similarly should be construed as a divine intrusion, a response to the mess made by human beings, and it needed to be attested through miracles.²⁰

What does this historical overview of the Christian apologetic use of miracles have to do with the Keller article? It shows that there are purposes for miracles which really fall into neither his epistemic nor his practical categories, and which justify miraculous intervention not primarily for the benefit of the recipient but for an attestation of the moral character of God and the truth of the Christian message. In addition, many are helped through the miracle performed on one, either by being convinced of the truth of the Christian faith or by receiving a basis for their own ultimate destiny.

On behalf of Keller’s position, it might be argued that the apologetic understanding of miracles as attestation to divine truth is sufficiently like his epistemic miracles to be subject to the same critique he develops for the latter. A brief review of this critique, however, will show that this is not the case, that the critique is too oriented to individual benefit to be applicable. Keller applies his stock complaint to epistemic miracles: ‘My objection... is that God’s performing epistemic miracles for some people and not for others would involve unfairness on God’s part’ (62). Eyewitnesses, for example, would have a decided advantage over those who were told the stories later. It would be easier for the eyewitnesses to believe, so it appears that God would be unfair in providing such an advantage.

In response, however, it is not really so important as Keller seems to suppose for everyone to come to the same beliefs. Recalling the argument above that those who do not receive the benefit of a miracle may have other goods conferred on them just as significant as those conferred to the recipient, it may be that nonrecipients or those who know the miracle stories rather than the events themselves will develop a faith relationship with God that is stronger and more meaningful than that of recipients. It may even be that

¹⁶ See the discussion of the ‘uniformity defence’ in David and Randall Basinger *Philosophy and Miracle: The Contemporary Debate* vol. 2 of *Problems in Contemporary Philosophy* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986), 110–117.

¹⁷ Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 237–239.

¹⁸ Richard Swinburne *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 190. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 192–193.

they will not accept the Christian revelation but receive a blessing just as great through an alternative, perhaps another faith, provided also by God. Keller maintains that 'if the religious message to some people is accompanied by obvious miracles and to others it is not, the latter have been placed at a disadvantage' (63). Not at all, if God is greater than the particular revelation attested by the particular miracle. If Christian truth is exclusive, as many apologetics have argued, then Keller is right. But there is no good reason to think of the Christian revelation as the exclusive truth about God, as countless contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion have argued.

A third problem in the Keller argument is that his empirical description of miracle experiences is inaccurate in that it fails to accommodate the actual relations that are prominently displayed in the lives of believers involving prayer, belief, community, and recovery. His charge of arbitrariness, recall, says that there is an absence of pattern in claims to miraculous recovery. He correctly calls attention to the paradoxes that not all for whom prayer is offered are healed and many for whom prayer is not offered experience spontaneous remissions that could well qualify as miracles but are never thought of as such.

Keller's account, however, is a sterile, philosophical version of an experience that is quite different within the various denominational contexts in which belief in miracles has been prominent. In the latter there is a tradition of expectation that miracles will occur, accompanied by full realization that in many, perhaps most cases in which prayers are offered the desired result will not occur. Recoveries are often reported in these contexts, but rarely with a sense of pride on the part of the recipient or on the part of those who prayed. Rather, the entire experience is typically one of humility in which those who recover confess their unworthiness and commit themselves to the task which God, they believe, must have for them based on their miraculous recovery. Those who have prayed rejoice over the recovery of their loved ones while standing in awe of the miraculous power, and love, of God.

The desired recovery often does not come, of course. Here the response of the believing community that has been in prayer is varied, but typical reactions are to express disappointment to each other, to communicate love and support for the person who has not recovered as well as for his or her family, to affirm faith that the 'ways of the Lord' are high above our own and thus that there must be a reason that we do not comprehend, and occasionally to speak of the apparent injustice to each other, or even to God, asking again the biblical question of Job. These matters are not taken lightly in the community of faith. Profound disappointment is experienced by those who have prayed, perhaps an entire congregation.

So, is there arbitrariness on the part of God in these circumstances? Not necessarily, for we have little idea what larger purposes are to be accomplished both in the lives of those who receive the benefit and in the lives

of those who do not. Is there an absence of pattern? Perhaps one could say abstractly, with Keller, that there certainly is no pattern for it is not at all predictable which recipient of prayer will be healed and which person beyond the perimeter of the praying faithful might experience a recovery sufficiently unusual to be considered miraculous had it occurred in another context.

Concretely, however, there is more of a pattern than this abstract analysis allows. Though to my knowledge there has been no large-scale study of the locus of miracle reports, by and large they seem to be reported in the context of a believing community, as a result of prayer, with expressions of great faith by those involved. Sometimes they take place in conjunction with a Marian visitation or at holy shrines of the Church such as Lourdes; and sometimes they take place in conjunction with the ministry of faith-healing crusades. More often, however, there is no public spectacle. Rather, it occurs in the privacy of personal or group Bible study and prayer. Surely when we see these experiences over and over, as charismatic Christians report, in the context of faith in God and in response to the prayerful appeal for divine intervention, it is reasonable to say that there is a pattern to the miraculous, though in faith and humility believers would always confess that we can never control God.

Sceptics might argue in response that the prominence of miracle reports in the believing community is exactly what one would expect, given that belief in miracles is integral to the relevant denominational or charismatic traditions and that the celebration of miracles is an established element of their teaching and preaching. It represents, in other words, a kind of Freudian wish fulfilment, an illusion that is kept alive by the ongoing practices of the faith. Miracle reports are more prominent here, but that is no sign that miracles are.

In response, the sceptic may well be giving an accurate account. Miracles are, after all, notoriously difficult to document. But our concern has to do not with the certitude that a miracle has occurred; rather, it relates specifically to the pattern involved in the reports of miracles. Keller has argued that there is not one. I insist that there is, given the dominant context of miracle reports.

A fourth problem in Keller's account is that inadequate attention is given to the role of miracles in relation to mission. From the beginning, the Christian faith has been an evangelical religion, and the biblical promise that those who carry out the mission with courage will on occasion receive the benefit of miraculous protection is clear. In the Markan version of the commission of the disciples, for instance, there is the promise, sometimes misinterpreted, that they will 'pick up serpents', and if they inadvertently drink poison, 'it will not hurt them' (Mark 16:18, NRSV). In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's mission is obviously depicted by Luke as protected by

the supernatural power of God, particularly during the many adventures of the Apostle's sea voyage to Rome at the conclusion of the book. Catholic history is filled with stories of miraculous intervention of behalf of the saints who perform unusual service for the Church, and the evangelical mission of Protestant Christianity is similarly replete with accounts of miraculous divine protection and assistance for those who sacrifice much for the sake of the Gospel.

The significance of this correlation between miracle and mission is that it shows again a larger purpose for miracles, one which goes far beyond the personal benefit of the recipient. In the case of the Apostle Paul, of the disciples, of the Saints of the Church, and of the missionaries, many people are blessed through the miracles that come to one person. The proclamation of the Gospel, the establishment of churches, and the social relief ministry of the Church are assured through such divine intervention.

Keller is aware of the miracle/mission connection and attempts to respond to objections to his position based upon it. He takes up the objection in the context of a discussion of epistemic miracles, but the same line of argument would apply to practical miracles of personal protection. Keller points out that someone might attempt to undercut the charge of unfairness against God by holding that not everyone needs equally the benefit of epistemic miracles. There are some, perhaps, who have been selected to perform a 'special task', and who have, therefore, a direct and obvious need for an unusual revelation (63). By extension, we might apply the same consideration to those who have committed themselves to the Christian mission. Perhaps they also have a direct and obvious need for miraculous protection in order to guarantee the success of their work.

Keller's response to this objection is that many of the epistemic miracles seem to have been performed for individuals who do not have a special task, and thus the miracle/mission connection is easily severed. But his examples are quite revealing. Keller points out that Elijah's victory over the priests of Baal was done for the benefit of 'ordinary Israelites' and that some of the miracles of Jesus were done in the presence of people 'of whom no special task was required' (64). It should be noted against Keller, however, that the immediate recipients of the benefits of these miracles were Elijah and Jesus, and the people healed through the miracles of Jesus. The crowd of bystanders played little role. In addition, if the crowd is made the focus of attention, Keller is not in position to say that these are merely 'ordinary' people for whom there is no special task. He does not know this any more than he knows that nonrecipients of miracles receive inferior benefits from God.

Another response from Keller is the standard complaint that many believers who have faced great difficulties have not been recipients of the miraculous intervention promised in the miracle/mission correlation. He asks his stock question: 'Is it fair that God grant a confirmatory miracle to

some on whom an extraordinarily difficult task is laid and not to others' (64).² His point is well taken that there are many who make great sacrifices for the Christian mission and then suffer greatly themselves, apparently bereft of the needed miraculous intervention. But it does not necessarily imply that God has been unfair. We have seen already that it is preferable for miracles to be occasional, not performed on all occasions in which there is a need. And we have seen as well that benefits at least as great as those conferred on recipients of the benefits of divine intervention may come to those who are not so blessed. In addition to these considerations, there is the beautiful biblical promise of a special heavenly reward for the 'martyrs' who have given their lives for the faith (Revelation 6:9) and thus who apparently did not receive the needed miracle. In the light of these factors, the unfairness of divine action or inaction in these cases disappears.

Keller's work with the idea of 'special tasks' thus suffers from the same problems we have seen throughout. The account is sterile and mechanical, and it is based on the hasty generalization regarding what can be known about recipients and nonrecipients of the benefits of miracles. The point of the miracle/mission correlation is to show again that there are purposes for miracles that go beyond the satisfaction of epistemic or practical needs to their recipients. Keller misses this point in his concern for egalitarianism in the theological context.

My fifth and final point of criticism is focused on the implications of the moral critique for the Resurrection, the central Christian miracle. Does Keller really wish to argue a point not made in the article but certainly implicit in the position, namely that the Resurrection is immoral? Many Christian theologians and philosophers deny the historical factuality of the Resurrection, basing their position perhaps on the philosophical arguments of Hume, or conceptual puzzles pertaining to personal identity and resurrection, or the existential theology of Rudolf Bultmann, or the more recent historical dismantling of the Easter event carried out by the Jesus Seminar. My concern is not with the historical factuality of the event. Rather, if it happened along the lines of the scriptural accounts and in accord with the Pauline interpretation, and more generally in accord with orthodox Christian doctrine, should it be seen as an unfair divine intervention?

It is important to be as clear as possible regarding exactly what is being claimed when it is said that God raised Jesus from the dead. In accord with scripture, I am thinking of Jesus as having fully and completely died on the cross on Friday afternoon. On Sunday, and for an indeterminate time thereafter, he encountered various followers, first of all Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18), then the disciples (John 20:19–23), two followers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–22), and then various other individuals and groups, culminating in the giving of the commission to the disciples before the Ascension recounted by Luke (Acts 1:9). The stories indicate that some

of his followers experienced the Resurrected Lord as a physical reality (according to John 20:27, he tells Thomas to touch him, and in John 21:9–14 he apparently consumes fish with the disciples) and others as a spiritual reality (according to John 20:17, he tells Mary Magdalene not to hold him; in John 20:19 he can suddenly appear in a room with the disciples; and some, such as the two walking toward Emmaus, do not immediately recognize him (Luke 24:16)). Paul also claims to have had an encounter with the Resurrected Christ (apparently a reference to the Damascus Road experience), and offers the model of a ‘spiritual body’ as the best way of understanding the nature of the reality which confronts the followers of Jesus after the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:35–50). Following Paul, traditional Christian doctrinal formulations, and especially the insightful analyses of Wolfhart Pannenberg, I will think of the new reality which they encountered as transcendental, something fundamentally different from any reality they had previously known.²¹ The Resurrection so construed is a real historical event, a divine initiative that reverses the normal processes of bodily decay, and changes the body of Jesus in such a way that it would no longer be subject to death and decay. The Resurrection does not represent the mere revival of faith in the disciples but a supernatural act of God.

I suppose that if we follow Keller, we should ask at this point why God chose to raise Jesus from the dead whereas he did not raise other individuals of similar commitment (messianic figures perhaps, or just other good people) and in similar situations (dead). I cannot imagine any answer to this question which would be subject to the charge that God acted unfairly.

No one knows the mind of God, or more specifically why he raised Jesus from the dead. I will explore several standard speculative answers to that question, however, in order to see more clearly whether the Resurrection might in some way be immoral. There seem to be three prominent ways of understanding God’s purpose in raising Jesus. First, it may be seen in the apologetic sense discussed above as proof that Jesus was the Son of God and that his message is true. Second, it may be seen in accord with kenotic theology as the ultimate vindication of Jesus himself. By the account of the early Christian hymn recorded in Philippians 2:5–11, the preexistent Christ ‘emptied’ himself, took the form of a human being, was obedient even to the point of experiencing a humiliating death, and therefore is now exalted. And third, it may be that God raised Jesus in order to give us hope for our own ultimate destiny. Again, in the Corinthians passage noted above, Paul pictures the Resurrection of Christ as the ‘first fruits’, meaning that we also will have a resurrection along the same lines. This indeed is fundamental to the Christian message as Paul articulates it: ‘If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are all men most to be pitied’ (1 Corinthians 15:19).

²¹ See the early work of Pannenberg for careful articulation of this view, especially his *Jesus – God and Man* trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 76–77.

There is nothing immoral about any of these purposes. The apologetic interpretation depicts God as empowering the proclamation of the Gospel through the Resurrection. We have already dealt with Keller's objection to such epistemic miracles, finding it insufficient because he assumes without foundation that those who do not receive the strongest attestation do not receive other benefits at least as great.

On the Resurrection as vindication of Jesus personally, it appears that with this understanding the Church is attempting to be as morally sensitive as possible regarding Christ himself. Sometimes the atonement is pictured simply as the sacrifice of Christ for us, with little attention to his own ultimate destiny. The Resurrection as vindication shows that God has not used Christ for our benefit, an act which would truly be immoral. Rather, we receive benefit from a tragic event of human history, but the one who suffered most is now exalted as Lord.²²

Keller might complain that God has been unfair in raising Christ but not other good people. In response, of course, Christian doctrine says that all followers of Christ, or perhaps everyone, will be raised at the last day. Perhaps it is unfair that Jesus would be raised prior to his followers, but such an argument would be difficult to support indeed!

I can imagine a rather bizarre argument on this point, but one not too far afield given the mechanical understanding of divine justice at work in the Keller article. Perhaps the objection would be made that the Resurrection is unfair because God did not raise the other great religious prophets of human history from the dead. Why raise Jesus, in other words, and leave Mohammed, Gautama, and many others in the grave? Answers to this question abound. In the first place, Resurrection really means little in many religious contexts. For instance, what value might it have if the basic purpose of the religion is to provide the Enlightenment which will lead to release from the wheel of rebirth? Resurrection would be meaningless there, serving only to complicate the process of releasement. Keller might respond by complaining that the Christian faith is then given an advantage over eastern religions in that it has a Resurrected Lord and a promise of resurrection for those who believe whereas a Buddhist or Hindu faith does not. But this overlooks the point I have made throughout. There is no way of knowing that those who do not receive the benefit of a miracle do not receive other benefits, in this case spiritual, that are just as great.

The third possible motivation for the Resurrection mentioned above seems to be once more distinctively moral in that according to this account God initiates an action in history that will serve to give hope and faith to many. Keller might argue that it is unfair in that it does not provide hope and faith

²² I argued in an earlier article that utilitarian theodicies should be rejected on behalf of a Kantian theodicy in which those who suffer are themselves vindicated in the afterlife. See 'A Kantian theodicy', *Faith and Philosophy*, 1 (1984), 236–248.

for everyone, but this objection once again overlooks the possibility that those earnestly seeking the truth may find it elsewhere and that the truth so discovered might well provide a benefit for them at least as great as the hope and faith created in Christians by the Resurrection.

I can find no interpretation of divine purpose in regard to the Resurrection, therefore, that would show it to be somehow immoral. And if this central miracle of the faith does not represent an unfair divine initiative, it will be difficult to argue that other miracles, either of the epistemic or practical kind, are immoral.

Having argued in several ways that Keller's moral rejection of miracles is unacceptable, before closing I would like to discuss briefly the basic philosophical demand that accounts of divine action be assessed in terms of fairness. My analysis throughout has accepted Keller's presupposition in this regard. Indeed, the argument of this paper is specifically that it is possible to believe in miracles while preserving the assumption that a moral God would treat different persons equally.

Justice as fair treatment, of course, is a ubiquitous assumption of contemporary moral theory (Gewirth and other proponents of egalitarian ethics) and political philosophy (Rawls and liberal political theorists generally). This concern has motivated human rights thinking internationally and has been at the heart of liberation theology in all of its expressions, especially feminist critique. It seems that the principle is questioned only when attention is turned to certain prominent doctrines of classical theism and orthodox Christian theology such as revelation, inspiration of scripture, grace, election, and predestination. It is within this special religious context that some thinkers will argue with Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* that justice as fair treatment is inadequate to our understanding of a transcendent God. It may be, to touch Keller's concern and mine, that God performs a miracle conferring a benefit on one person that is simply not matched by a similar benefit for others. It is unfair, but that is the nature of grace, or so the argument goes.

Even in the religious domain, however, and even in the specialized doctrinal domains mentioned above, we should insist with Keller on fair treatment. Belief in God has been made very reasonable by a number of religious philosophers in recent years, but the epistemological obstacle remains. We still do not know in any meaningful sense whether God exists or which of the myriad purported revelations of God most approximates to the truth. We do know, in contrast, that other human beings exist and we possess from virtually all quarters of moral reflection argument demanding fair treatment of others. A moral human being would not treat others in an arbitrary and unequal fashion. Whatever we say about divine action, it should at least comply with this basic human moral intuition. God transcends human thought, to be sure, and as the Bible says, the ways of God are above ours.

But at the very least, as the same scriptures assert throughout, God is a just God. The transcendence of God in this respect should be seen as superior ability to bring about justice through divine action, not as the willingness to subvert justice through arbitrary and unequal treatment of different persons. An account of divine action that portrays God in this latter way will call into question the goodness of God. And so, as Keller insists, would accounts of the miraculous if they really portray an unequal conferring of benefits. My argument is that they need not do this, and thus belief in miracles need not call into question the goodness of God.²³

In conclusion, though Keller's basic assumption about fairness is correct and the task of moral critique is very appropriate for contemporary Christian philosophy, the claim that miracles are immoral because to perform them God would have to choose some and reject others in similar circumstances is false. It depends on a sterile and mechanical view of divine grace, it overlooks the idea of broader purposes for miracles found in Christian apologetics, it inaccurately describes the concrete situations in which miracle accounts abound, it fails to accommodate the correlation between miracles and mission, or the special tasks for which God might choose various ones of us, and it implies that the Resurrection is somehow immoral, a view readily seen to be difficult to sustain. The general problems in the Keller account which have surfaced over and over in our analysis are: it is a highly abstract and individualistic understanding of miracles that accommodates neither the concrete circumstances of community and faith in which they are reported nor the larger providential purposes Christians have always assumed for them; and it is based on the hasty generalization that those who do not receive benefits of miracles do not receive other benefits just as great. This assumption makes sense if we assume further the exclusive truth of the Christian revelation; but surely this latter assumption is aristocratic in a global and pluralistic religious culture.²⁴

²³ The relation between moral equality and accounts of divine action has been given inadequate attention in contemporary religious philosophy. Discussions of divine command theory sometimes embody such concerns, and feminist theologians have surely attended to the topic in their critical appropriation of biblical claims. As an issue of religious philosophy, however, the literature is slight. One rather direct contemporary discussion may be found in the dialogue between Peter Byrne and Richard Swinburne regarding the latter's *Revelation: from Metaphor to Analogy* (see Byrne's review article, 'A defence of Christian revelation', esp. 388–390 and Swinburne's 'Reply to Byrne', esp. 397, in *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993).

²⁴ I would like to thank the members of my Philosophy of Religion Seminars at Berry College for their insightful responses to various drafts of this paper. My thanks also to the readers who evaluated this paper for *Religious Studies* for their helpful recommendations.