



Praying for rain? Reformed perspectives from the Southern African context

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the question raised in this volume whether praying for rain is an appropriate response to the impact of climate change from a Southern African perspective. It commences with a missionary story from Chipata in Zambia, reflects on subsequent contextual changes, and raises some theological questions on discerning the movement of the Spirit, divine action, and providence. It addresses such questions with reference to material developed for a “Season of Creation” from within the Western Cape, namely on the theme of “God and El Niño: What can we expect from the God of Exodus?” It concludes that praying for rain is a rather limited ecclesial response to climate change that raises more questions than it can answer.

A Story from My Extended Family

When it comes to praying for rain, I need to tell a story often recalled by my father-in-law, Martin Pauw. He comes from a lineage of Dutch missionaries to Southern Africa. Jacobus Cornelis Pauw (1837–1918) was a pioneer who came to South Africa in 1861 and worked at Zoar and later at Zuurbraak in the Western Cape. He became the moderator of the first synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church after its controversial establishment in 1881. He had 12 children, including Christoffel Petrus Pauw (1878–1950, my wife’s great-grandfather), who arrived on 6 June 1905 as a missionary at Fort Jameson (later Chipata), in the former Northern Rhodesia.¹ Jacobus Cornelius Christoff Pauw (1909–1985), the son of Christoffel Petrus Pauw, also served as a missionary/pastor in Chipata, while my father-in-law, Christoff Martin Pauw (1940–), grew up in Chipata and later lectured at Justo Mwale Theological Seminary in Lusaka (1975–1983), named after the first Zambian to be ordained to the ministry in any denomination at Madzimoyo on 29 September 1929.

The town of Chipata began in 1895 as a military post of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) established by Cecil John Rhodes. The site was chosen to be about 20 miles west of the headquarters of the Ngoni Chief Mpezeni. This history reveals something of the collision of forces amidst which the early mission was established. I rely here on an unpublished report from Martin Pauw (2013) on the history of the Chipata Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia:

¹ See Jurie van Wyk, “Pauw, Christoffel Petrus,” Dictionary of African Christian Biography, 2003, http://www.dacb.org/stories/zambia/pauw_christoffel.html.

One may counter this by suggesting that if one cannot pray for rain, then there is little point in any petitionary prayer. This leaves ample room for other forms of prayer such as worship, praise, thanksgiving, confession, and dedication. The point is that petitionary prayer, praying for oneself or for others, is readily abused. At best, any form of prayer is an expression of what lies beyond the locus of control of the one who prays. We can work hard to secure food, but ultimately the fact that I have food on the table (and others do not) is not only dependent upon me. It is beyond my locus of control. The same applies to safety precautions in going on a journey. Thus we pray for a safe return, bringing before God our inability to control our destiny. The same would apply to prayers for fertility and for rains. However, in the case of rain this is only a half-truth, since we have been meddling with the weather, deforesting the land, and changing the composition of the earth's atmosphere. We are living in the age of the Anthropocene, which suggests that even the weather is within our sphere of influence, if perhaps not our control. If so, what can we, especially Reformed Christians in (South) Africa, pray for? I would suggest a threefold prayer with immense inner tensions:

Firstly, following Psalm 13:2, a prayer of protest is in order: How long, dear Father, will you tolerate the injustice that those who contributed least to climate change will suffer most under its consequences? *Kyrie eleison* (Matt. 15:22)!

Secondly, a prayer of confession is appropriate for Reformed Christians, specifically in South Africa, following Psalm 51:8: Jesus Christ, our broken Saviour, we confess our insincerity in seeing the faults of others, but when we examine our hearts we acknowledge that we aspire to the consumerist lifestyles of the affluent, while some of us have indeed contributed more than our fair share of greenhouse emissions. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sinned against us (Matt. 6:12).

Thirdly, a prayer for guidance and inspiration is appropriate, following Psalm 104:30: Spirit of the living God, come, renew your whole creation, guide us to remain steadfast on the path of faith, hope, and solidarity with the victims of climate change, also when love grows cold.¹³ Sustain us to endure to the end (Matt. 24:13) and deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13).

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers; your sustaining love endures forever (Ps. 136).

¹³ See the booklet produced by the World Council of Churches in preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, *Solidarity with the Victims of Climate Change: Reflections on the World Council of Churches' Response to Climate Change* (Geneva: WCC, 2002). The document raises the need for solidarity when "love grows cold."