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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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contemporary living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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The current “success theology” with its emphasis on personal popularity and highly visible ministry goals exalts the promises of the kingdom of God but rejects or ignores its demands. When this new cultism is accompanied by moral breakdown in the life of the Christian leader, the manipulation of the communication media and the failure to give leadership in difficult ethical issues such as abortion, poverty and racism, the Church loses all credibility before a watching world. The work of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement to come. He transforms God’s people into the image of Christ as salt and light in the world and they become his agents for restraining evil and corruption and his witnesses to the convicting and guiding light of Christ himself.

Christ calls us to follow the way of the cross and to identify with him in his earthly humiliation. We suffer together with the whole humankind as we share in the suffering of creation on its way to liberation and freedom in the Spirit. We agonise with the growing poverty and social and economic injustice in the world today on a scale never experienced before. In the midst of violence and oppression we adopt the role of “suffering servants”. This may lead us to identify with the legitimacy of oppressed peoples’ concerns against the claims of legality as in South Africa and to disobey Caesar in order to obey God as in other parts of the world. As the Holy Spirit enables us to faithfully witness to both the goodness of God and the justice of God he speaks with convicting power to the conscience of the people and their leaders. Whenever Christians have embraced this role of powerlessness and servanthood, God has been pleased in many cases to multiply their number many times. This law of the harvest has been amazingly evident in recent years in parts of Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

May the fruits of Oslo ’85 be seen in greater Christian unity, in holiness and justice, and in world evangelization. The promise is

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.” ([Acts 1:8](#)).

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**Dr. Nicholls is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship and lives in New Delhi, India.**

**Dr. Bruce J. Nicholls was a participant in the consultation on the Holy Spirit and Evangelization held May 28–June 1, 1985 in Oslo, Norway under the joint sponsorship of WEF and LCWE. He also contributed a paper on “The Holy Spirit Confronts the World of Religions”. A book summarising the 40 papers and findings of the consultation is being edited by Dr. David Wells and will be published early in 1986. p. 348**

# **Belief and Unbelief in Prayer A Comparison Between Calvin and Karl Barth**

**Han Chul-Ha**

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The problem of modern theology lies in neither dogmatic inaccuracy nor dogmatic heresy, but on unbelief which the theologies contain. It is just the same with Barth's teaching on prayer. The doctrine is, so to speak, something like a grammar on faith. When a doctrinal error is involved in a statement of faith, the faith becomes also erroneous. And yet, although there is no error in the grammar of faith, still the statements of faith may be mere words and not occupied with the object of the faith. We cannot overlook the unbelief lurking behind their professions of faith.

## I

### BARTH ON PRAYER AS PETITION

Barth presents systematically the teaching on prayer in the fourth part of Volume III of his *Dogmatics*. In the beginning of his exposition, it is indicated that the purpose of 'prayer' differs from that of 'confession'. The special concern of 'confession' is that man may give honor to God for the purpose of "seeking, asking and accepting from Him something he needs", not to "offer something to God or do something for Him."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Barth puts 'petition' at the center of the prayer and consequently he follows the tradition of the Reformers, especially of Calvin. He defines prayer decisively as 'petition'. He says in addition:

How can we understand this properly without perceiving at once that perhaps the very highest honor that God claims from man and man can pay Him is that man should seek and ask and accept at His hands, not just something, but everything that he needs?<sup>2</sup>

In this way, Barth indicates that we can glorify God not only by praising Him and confessing to Him, but actually more by seeking, asking and accepting everything at His hands. p. 349

### UNIVERSAL AND NOT PARTICULAR

Barth is explaining why it is important to understand prayer definitively as 'petition' with two points. The first reason is because of our "absolutely needy relation to God." This keeps in touch with the feeling of "absolute dependence upon God" which is the essence of Schleiermacher's theology. But we must make it clear that the place of 'prayer' is not just to 'confirm' our absolute dependence on God, but rather on this basis and ground to "ask such a God" for "something relative." In Barth's exposition of prayer the aspect of absolute dependence is well presented and consequently there is nothing wrong in it as an exposition of prayer, but this *aspect of the place of prayer* for our "relative needs" tends to be absorbed into the former aspect. Even in the introductory words this fact is apparent: "Man should seek and ask and accept at His hands, not just something, but everything that he needs." The statement that "all things are miracles" can be the same thing as saying "there is no miracle." Likewise, the statement that we should ask Him for "everything" can be actually regarded as the statement that we need not ask Him anything. At first sight, the words "not just something but everything" seem to be those of a pious man. But for us, provided we accept at His hands merely 'everything' but not something

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. tr. by G. W. Bromiley *et al.*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), III, 4. p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

‘particular’, God actually remains outside the sphere of ‘something particular’ and is unable to exert an influence upon that sphere.

## ULTIMATE AND NOT PEN-ULTIMATE

Barth’s second reason why prayer must be petitionary has the same weakness: “In prayer it is a matter of the man himself—he who in other spheres must function and serve, and therefore present a *persona*, and to that extent to wear a mask ... The one who has need of God and in spite of everything is man himself.”<sup>3</sup> This existentialistic outlook of man and his world puts us in completely different relationship to God. Here a sharp distinction is made between man himself and the world to which he belongs. The relationship to God is related to the authentic self. This point of view coincides with that of Paul Tillich when he insists that not all the questions of human life are given answers from theology but only the questions of ultimate concern. All of these ideas are traced back to Kierkegaard’s existentialistic standpoint that man finds his authentic self when he is **P. 350** confronted with death. It may be one way of our standing before God. Solitude and independence may represent one aspect of man. However, a human being, in his real state of affairs, was created in the world, and is involved in various kinds of relationship, and is living on the relative things and the daily bread which are given to him. But, even after that serious affirmation of ourselves in the face of death, still we may need our prayers, particularly because of our relative needs of daily life and numerous pen-ultimate things. Now those ‘other spheres’ are really the concerns of our life. As a matter of fact, the places where we are actually related to God are no other than these very ‘other spheres’.

## PUBLIC AND NOT PRIVATE

Barth shows the same tendency of weakening private prayer and of prayers for individual needs, when he makes the subject of prayer to be always ‘we’. Following the teaching of the Lord’s prayer, he concludes that “prayer is the prayer of the Christian community.” He practically ruled out petitions for individual needs. “This is what takes away the egoistic character that it might and indeed must have in itself as the utterance of his personal privation and desire, as his personal asking.”<sup>4</sup> These words are true. In his exposition of the Lord’s prayer, Calvin also explains the will of ‘our Father’ that with a feeling of ‘brotherly love’ we should proceed to God in order to ask for our brothers in Christ, and even embrace ‘all men who dwell on earth’; and sums up conclusively: “all prayers ought to be such as to look that community which our Lord has established in his Kingdom and his household.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Calvin immediately added: “this does not prevent us from praying especially for ourselves and for certain others.” So what Barth said is by itself not wrong at all. But what we miss is, the essential point of prayer, namely the necessity of prayer for individual or personal needs, where the genuine power of God is manifested. It is this very essence of prayer that is suppressed with the above pretext. It is a German theological tradition that this aspect of religion has been completely suppressed since the day of Kant under the term ‘Gunstwerberei’ (favor-seeking) in contrast to ‘moralische (moral) Religion’. However, our Lord, as he taught us to pray, also did meet all kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by J. T. McNeil and tr. by F. L. Battles, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) III, xx, 38.

individual needs in healing the sick, caring for the poor, and accepting the sinners. In the light of the fact we are **P. 351** convinced that he attached importance to both the public and individual sides of prayer. The question is whether we seek and ask and accept everything that we need at His hands, and whether we believe and yield to the teaching of Jesus: "Ask, and it shall be given you." This word of Jesus indeed encourages us to pray for our individual needs but it is extremely weakened in Barth.

## INTERCESSORY AND NOT PERSONAL

This tendency becomes apparent when Barth develops a concrete form of prayer. He disregards completely private prayer,<sup>6</sup> and makes all petitions to be 'intercession'. Particularly he rejects 'extemporary prayer'. The result is to make prayer a mere liturgy. Consequently the aspects of 'asking' and 'accepting' become weakened. Of course, he is not ignorant of such general meaning of prayer. He certainly grasped this point when he said as follows: "Prayer is an act of obedience to God who commands prayer. If God commands prayer, certainly He will hear the prayer and will fill the empty hands of one who comes to him in humility and obedience."<sup>7</sup> Yet when it is asked whether this rule is applicable in the very reality of our life's struggle for faith it becomes ambiguous. If we come to Calvin, the matter becomes apparent all at once; and what is missing in Barth is eloquently expressed as the very focal point.

## II

### CALVIN ON PRAYER AS PETITION

Calvin, in that long chapter of Institute III,xx, defines prayer as petition, in the literal sense, viz. "to obtain something" from God. This is exactly the opposite to the modern Western theologians' attempt to remove petition as an unnecessary stumbling block to our faith. They reject this truth as 'favor-seeking religion', or as 'superstition' or as an old 'working hypothesis' which is no more necessary for a man come of age. As an introduction, Calvin sums up the meaning of prayer as follows:

Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling upon his name. By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as **p. 352** we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace ... we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ills is hid from him who, we are convinced, has both the will and the power to take the best care of us.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin gives six reasons why prayer is not superfluous in answer to such a charge: Firstly, we need to be accustomed in every need to flee from him as to a sacred anchor. Secondly, that we should never be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving. Fourthly, having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayer, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently. Fifthly, that at the

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<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, III, 4, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xx, 2.

same time we embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayer. Finally, that use and experience confirm his providence ... he never extends his hand to help his own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help.<sup>9</sup>

### **RULES FOR PRAYER AS “ASK-GIVE”**

Thus, we can see that Calvin never departs from the biblical teaching on prayer: ‘ask-given’. Calvin’s four rules of right prayer follow exactly the same thought: *First*, our prayer necessarily is directed to giving God due reverence. “As we must turn keenness of mind toward God, so affection of heart has to follow.”<sup>10</sup> The *second* rule is a sincere sense of want, and with penitence. “... that in our petitions we ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest—nay, burning—desire to attain it.”<sup>11</sup> At this point, in contrast to Barth, Calvin rather attacks “many perfunctorily intoned prayers after a set form, as if discharging a duty to God,”<sup>12</sup> while Barth feels “so-called extemporaneous prayer” to be something inferior. Calvin stresses the needs of penitence and repentance both in this second and *third* rule, mainly for two reasons, first, that without sincere repentance we cannot actually approach God. “The beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor **P. 353** should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to him.”<sup>13</sup> And second, whenever we ask God something, we should truly become humble before Him, recognizing that there remains no other hope except supplicating to Him. Calvin warns us not to mock God while we are praying. “As I have just said, mankind is so stuffed with such depravity that for the sake of mere performance men often beseech God for many things that they are dead sure will, apart from his kindness, come to them from some other source, or already lie in their possession.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, we in our Korean church services today, can frequently perceive that God is being mocked rather than being worshipped. The *fourth* rule is the confident hope in prayer: “a sure hope that our prayer will be answered”. Here again Calvin repeats what the Bible teaches: “I say unto you, whatever you seek..., believe that you will receive it, and it will come to you.” ([Mark 11:24p](#)). “Whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” ([Matthew 21:22](#)). “Let him ask in faith, with no wavering”. ([James 1:6](#)) This faith is to Calvin no other than the secure knowledge of God’s kindness and gentle dealing with us.

### **III**

### **PRAYER AS CHRISTO-CENTRIC IN CALVIN AND BARTH**

Calvin’s teaching is *christological*. His teaching on prayer is not exceptional in this character. At the beginning of this chapter he clearly indicates this point. A man is

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 6.

“destitute and devoid of all good things” in himself, he must, in order to “get resources to succor him in his need”, go outside himself: that is, to no other place except in Christ.

For in Christ he (God) offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him ... in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it [p. 354](#) remains for us to seek in him and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him.<sup>17</sup>

Barth also attempts Christological concentration in the whole field of his theology. But in him, Christo-centricism tends to absorb us into a third dimension; that is, from our first time, i.e. man’s time, into ‘the third time’, i.e., the time of grace. In this peculiar third time (*die dritte Zeit* which is distinguished from *Menschen Zeit* and *Gottes Zeit*) there is no more need for asking anything more except praising and thanksgiving for the overwhelming grace. But in case of Calvin, the reality of man’s time is never forgotten. This Christo-centricism in Calvin does not interfere with the rules of prayer which is strictly in the line of the biblical teaching: the ‘ask-given’ character of prayer.

And as a rule has been established to call upon God, and a promise given that those who call upon him shall be heard, so too we are particularly bidden to call upon him in Christ’s name; and we have the promise made that we shall obtain what we have asked in his name.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the Christo-centric character of Calvin’s faith makes the rules of prayer to become: “ask in Christ’s name and obtain in his name.”<sup>19</sup> Particularly Calvin emphasizes that we must ask in his name because of his heavenly ministry as our intercessor.

We ought carefully to note the circumstance of the time when Christ enjoins his disciples to take refuge in his intercession, after he shall have ascended into heaven. “In that hour,” he says, “you will ask in my name.” ([John 16:26](#))<sup>20</sup>

Calvin indicates that actually this principle of prayer was already practiced in the Old Testament times.

And we see that the saints, when they desired to obtain something, based their hope on sacrifices, for they knew them to be the sanctions of all petitions ... Hence we infer that God was from the beginning appeased by Christ’s intercession, so that he received the petitions of the godly.<sup>21</sup>

Then why does Christ assign a new honor, saying: “Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask” ([John 16:24](#))? It is because, although the Jews knew already the rudiments of the offices of Mediator, they “did not yet clearly understand that Christ by his very ascension into heaven would be a surer advocate of the church than [p. 355](#) he had

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II, xx, 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*



been before.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in Calvin’s Christo-centricism, he never causes the order of God and man to be made obscure by way of introducing the ambiguous dimension of ‘the third time’, and also never deviates from the fundamental character of the purpose of prayer to ‘obtain something from God’. Furthermore, Calvin and Barth contrast markedly with each other with regard to the fact that the former tries to find the ground of our asking in Christ’s name in the intercessory work of Christ in his heavenly ministry, whereas the latter totally excludes this aspect from his Christology.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

#### PETITION AND THANKSGIVING IN BARTH AND CALVIN

When we come to discuss the connection between prayer and ‘thanksgiving’, Barth here also represents a striking contrast to Calvin. For Barth, ‘thanksgiving’ is the ‘root’ of prayer and ‘essentially’ and ‘indispensably’ correlates to prayer. So, Professor Helmut Esser at the University of München had good reason when he insisted in a conversation I had with him at his home that what centers around Barth’s teaching on prayer is not ‘petition’, but ‘thanksgiving’.

So far as thanksgiving is concerned, it is in fact the root of prayer to the extent that it impinges immediately upon the objective divine basis of this action, upon the command of the gracious God, which is as such an invitation, a permission, a freedom given to man.<sup>24</sup>

Since God’s command to pray is a gracious invitation of God, we have to obey this command in gratitude. Even though in Barth’s theology, ‘thanksgiving’ is so intrinsically related to, and thus so easily accompanies prayer, yet for Calvin, it is not such an easy task to identify this relationship. The reason is that Calvin and Barth were differently situated when they wrote their works. Whereas Barth was expounding his theological considerations in opulent lecture rooms, Calvin was setting forth a realistic faith in the context of the troubled and distressful life situations of the Reformers who needed to be empowered by the hope of comforts in the world to come. While he is dealing with this question, Calvin is always involved in “the actual situation of believers who are to suffer tribulations and distresses.” Although “many by peevishness, boredom, impatience, bitter grief, and fear are impelled to mumble ... while still waiting to obtain what p. 356 they desire,” Calvin cites the passages of [Philippians 4:6f](#): “In all prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your petitions be made known to God,” bids believers to temper emotions and bless God cheerfully. Calvin takes the more concrete reasons that we should be thankful to God and praise him. “But if this connection ought to be in full force in things almost contrary, by a still holier bond God obligates us to sing his praises whenever he causes us to obtain our wishes.”<sup>25</sup> Throughout his exposition of the necessary connection between the petition and thanksgiving Calvin never fails to give a reason for this: “because he offers us unfailing reasons to praise and pray.”<sup>26</sup> In short, Calvin, even in the process of discussing the reason why thanksgiving is a necessary accompaniment to prayer, never

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<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, IV. 1, pp. 314 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 4, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xx, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Loc. cit.*



deviates from the basic formula of the prayer 'ask-given'. According to Calvin, we cannot but thank God because of the things which he previously gave us.

## V

### PRIVATE SPONTANEITY OR PUBLIC FORMALITY

Finally, the question of focus of attention on 'private prayer' or 'public prayer'; there is an obvious deviation in Barth from 'private' to 'public' from Calvin's understanding of the relationship of the two.

We must consider that whoever refused to pray in the holy assembly of the godly knows not what it is to pray individually, or in a secret spot, or at home. Again, he who neglects to pray alone and in private, however unremittingly he may frequent public assemblies, there contrives only windy prayers, for he defers more to the opinion of men than to the secret judgement of God.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin clearly explains the importance of both engagements of prayer but simultaneously shows the centrality of private engagement of prayer life. It is to learn what prayer is that one needs to pray in the holy assembly of the godly. This indicates that the true prayer and the standard of prayer must be learned there. In other words, apart from the church community, man cannot learn true prayer through his own private engagement of prayer life. But without private engagement of prayer, Calvin says, however unremittingly he may frequent public assemblies, he contrives only 'windy prayers' and he really does not refer prayer to the 'secret judgement of God.' On the contrary, Barth went to such an extreme: The rule: "Better according to a form than p. 357 not at all, or: better according to a form in the community than freely in separation."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Barth tries to defend 'formulated prayer' against 'extemporary prayer' and gives strong favor to 'public prayer' in place of 'private prayer'.

Of course, Barth is well aware of the danger involved in public prayer: only to set up a "mask behind which man does not really ask, or a mechanism by which he only tries to create for himself a good conscience in relation to the divine summons."<sup>29</sup> Consequently he indicates a problem of satisfying both needs: 'the necessity of form' and the necessity for 'free, hearty and spontaneous prayer.' Even though Calvin and Barth commonly refer to the important teaching of our Lord in [Matthew 6:7ff.](#), the latter well takes up our Lord's warning that our prayer must not be too repetitious, and he uses this warning, for the necessity of formulated prayer, but the former in the same teaching as Jesus, attached more importance to the phrase: "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret."

Accordingly, as has already been said, the Heavenly Teacher, when he willed to lay down the best rule for prayer, bade us enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray to our Father in secret, that our Father, who is in secret, may hear us.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xx, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, III, 4, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xx, 29

It is regretful that Barth omitted this important part but it is a natural result from his outlook on prayer. And Calvin indicates that the Lord has also impressed us with his example of his habitual withdrawal to a quiet spot that “we must not neglect these helps.”

The fundamental question involved in Barth’s theology of prayer is not really in this external form of prayer. The issue consists in the fact that in Barth’s theology the most essential contents of the doctrine of prayer is seriously weak or almost missing: that is its ‘ask-given’ character. In Calvin this character of prayer is fully enlivened throughout his teaching on prayer. Prayer is nothing but an instinctive Christian practice of “fleeing to him in every need.” As we bring our wishes before his eyes, we are prepared to receive his benefit with true gratitude of heart. Having obtained what we were seeking from his hand, we are led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently. At the same time, the things given from him become dearer to us than if we had obtained them from other sources. Thus, the fact of divine fatherly [p. 358](#) providence is indeed more clearly confirmed through our use and experience of it.

#### IV PRAYER AS NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL

This is exactly the point which modern Western theology in general tries to avoid. If Bonhoeffer was thinking of “doing away with that age-old working hypothesis” and standing on his own feet as man come-of age, without God but before God, he was only honestly pursuing the same theological line which Barth had already set. Is it then superstitious that we ask something of God in prayer? Moreover, as a result, when we get something in a miraculous way, that is beyond the process which we have thought about, and even though secular people may commonly say with reference to such an effect that it occurs by chance—or that we are just ignorant of the natural causality hidden behind it and nothing else—is it a superstition that we believe it is caused by the supernatural spiritual Being? Of course, it is not always by supernatural methods that God grants us things according to His will. His will may be over-ruling the causal nexus of various levels; numerological, spacio-physical, psycho-physical and socio-ethical. We can hardly explain away how these overlapping multidimensional dynamics work out to a certain result. The only thing which we know is that God, the living One, who holds power over the world given us by His fatherly care, kindly provides us the things which we need by his divine power.

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Dr. Han Chul-Ha is President of the Asia Center for Theological Studies and Mission, Seoul, Republic of Korea. This article was translated from Korean. [p. 359](#)

## The Church and Theological Ferment in Africa

Osadolor Imasogie