

Independence and autonomy of a church according to Evangelical-Lutheran Doctrine

I. The problem

1. We understand as such that a church is independent if she as a church does not depend on any forces or authorities from outside, e. g. political, cultural, influences, or even other church organisations which do not belong to the church.

2. The problem of independence and autonomy of a church arose when the relationship between church and state was questioned after democratic structures were introduced and kings were replaced by consistories to be responsible for the affairs of the church in the different regions of Germany, or even when kings changed agendas in the church, when churches saw the necessity not to be depended on decrees or decisions by men, but to be depended only on what the Lord of the Church says.

As a result of the struggle between church and worldly authorities for the freedom of the church may not only be that the church declares through a constitution, agreements, or regulations not to be dependent anymore on worldly authorities. As long as a church still depends on financial support or privileges granted by the state it is not independent yet. This is true concerning congregations and churches as long as they are still structured according to norms or institutions of state churches, or churches of a nation. (*Volkskirche*)

3. The problem concerning independence and autonomy of churches which originated by the work of missions was tackled when churches wanted to constitute their structures in constitutions. It concerns the relationship between constituting a young church and the mother church or the mission, from whose missionary work the congregations in the foreign country originated, or even in the same country where the church must be aware to keep its freedom and independence and autonomy not to be influenced by depending on political, social, cultural, racial, or even religious forces in their own country. The independence or autonomy of an independent church is not guaranteed if it becomes legally or financially independent from the church which sends financial and personal support. Independence or autonomy of a church is based if the structure of the congregations and the whole church and its administration can be structured in being free to decide on its constitution and on by-laws of the church.

4. The independence and autonomy of a church depends on the fact that it is not depending on forces, laws, regulations, demands, and ideologies which contradict the absolute and unlimited Lordship of Jesus Christ and do depend on His mandate. The independence and autonomy of a church will be endangered by demands coming from within or from outside the church.

5. The independence or autonomy of a church depends also on the structure how every congregation depends on the governing body of the church and is bound to the whole set up of the church body.

II. The Lutheran doctrine on the independence and autonomy of the church

6. According to Lutheran doctrine it is the living Lord Jesus Christ who constitutes the independence and autonomy of the church who acts in His congregation as the real present Lord.

7. Word and sacrament as deeds and acts of the living Lord Christ are the only unerring and infallible signs of the presence of the church in this world. Independence and autonomy of a church are a reality where the church has the absolute freedom to administer the means of grace according to the mandate of Christ, and to make use of them.

8. Word and sacrament are the only signs of the church (*notae ecclesiae*). That is the reason that two qualifications of the church must always be distinguished, but never may be separated: The hiddenness and the recognisability of the church. Talking about the independence and autonomy of the church is only concerned with the recognisability of the church. That is the administration of the means of grace and the gathering of the congregation which happens through the action of Christ by means of word and sacrament.

9. As the church is bound and closely connected to its signs: word and sacrament, it is called to the everlasting struggle to keep the means of grace according to their institution. This struggle is also the struggle to keep the true unity of the church. In this struggle to keep the integrity and unity of the church the church is concerned on the one side to preserve the common consent in doctrine which the orthodox, genuine, properly so called Lutheran Church acknowledges, confesses, accepts, and has confirmed in the confessions of the church and has bound itself to it by the confessional stand of the church and has promised to act accordingly - on the one hand -, but on the other side to be free from all ecclesiastical connections and unions with those adhering to false doctrines, to safeguard the own confessional stand - especially concerning closed pulpit and altar fellowship - and not to fall for open church fellowship. Independence and ecclesiastical autonomy is only given where the church is continually engaged in the struggle to preserve the integrity of the means of grace and draws the necessary consequences against error in doctrine and practice in order to persevere in union with the orthodox Lutheran Church.

10. According to Lutheran doctrine the ecclesiastical office of pastor is instituted. Therefore the independence and autonomy of a church stands with the freedom of the ministry. The connection between ministry and congregation may never be ignored. Independence or autonomy of a church is visibly expressed if the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered without depending on any ties, considerations, or restrictions that contradict the mandate of Jesus Christ.

11. To be bound to Jesus Christ establishes the solid foundation of the freedom of a Christian congregation which is served by the ministry with the means of grace. The congregation of Jesus Christ must defend her freedom against all anti-Christian forces from outside the church, but also against all forces of institutions within the church which contradict the Word of God or do not go accord to it.

12. Decisions concerning the independence of the church in doctrine, life and practice are taken on the ground of regulations concerning law and order. The Word of God does not decide on regulations, by-laws, constitutions of a church according to Sol. decl. 10, § 9, p. 637 Kolb/Wengert. This freedom is abused to the detriment of the congregation and the church where changes in good order or Christian discipline promote corruption of the confessional stand of the church, or the goals of the enemies of God to destroy real unity of the church. In such a case the change of the outward order of the church would suppress the pure doctrine of the church and would obscure it, and the congregation would be lead astray. As soon this danger appears also outward, indifferent orders of the church are to be taken as matters of faith and confession, and every kind of yielding would become a betrayal of Christ. This limitation of the unlimited freedom of the church concerning the outward regulations of the church reveals the only and real aim of regulating in church orders the life of a church, which has to serve that ministry of the pastoral office will be performed according to the mandate of Christ and to make it possible and to promote the gathering of the flock and to edify the congregation through the means of grace. As means to achieve this goal they have to be defended and if necessary to be changed according to the local and temporal circumstances.

III. Conclusion for the independence and autonomy of churches constituting themselves

13. The possibility and necessity and feasibility to constitute an independent church on the mission field do not depend on the matter of constitutions, or matters concerning financial or personal support, but depend on the matter of faith whether one trusts in the Lord that he will fulfil today and in future his promise: I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it, Math. 16:18. To be convinced of this promise is the presupposition of every future step towards real independence and autonomy of a church to initiate to detach it from existing regulations, methods, financial and personnel support, and rights. Every effort to regulate the independence and autonomy of the church have to be tested or to be judged whether they are fruits of this conviction to trust the Lord of the church, or whether they are motivated by other tendencies.

14. The goal of independence and autonomy of a church is reached according to the promotion of responsibility taken for the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the confession of the genuine Lutheran Church according to the Scriptures. Accordingly it is necessary for independence and autonomy of the church to take over responsibility for finances, persons in office, to be able to do mission work and govern the church, to reach the status of self-supporting, self-propagation, and self-governing, and also to be prepared to take over the struggle against old and new heresies, and accept the limits of church fellowship.

15. In order that the church reaches the full independence and autonomy step by step, the sending church has to support the development with all possible means, e. g.:

* the training of men to be able to take over the ecclesiastical ministry in the congregations in their country who will be capable to theologize independently and be willing and able to co-operate with other genuine Lutheran Churches in other countries.

* also to be able to motivate the congregations to become self-supporting, and to be able to lead the congregations in real Christian life and church discipline, and deeds of mercy and missionary endeavours.

* also the co-operation and independent decisions in areas outside the local congregation concerning matters and activities of the church as a whole.

16. Independence of a Lutheran Church may not be understood as separation from the sending church nor as isolation, nor as getting connected to a church body in which heresy dominates. - Instead a young Lutheran Church will proof her independence and autonomy by keeping connected with the genuine orthodox Lutheran Churches.

17. Independence and autonomy of a church cannot be guaranteed by being independent from financial support or personal help or assistance in administrative matters. It must be tested and be confirmed again and again in temptations, and be defended against perpetual attacks. In this context it is necessary to be reminded of the fact that the freedom of an independent genuine Lutheran Church which is bound to Word and sacrament is in principal not the same as that of nations politically, economically or in the social and cultural sphere. Although the independent church will loosen ties from the sending church or mission, its independence and autonomy has to be confirmed in her own struggle against detrimental attacks from nationalism and unionism.

18. The great challenge in future is to tackle the problem of independence and autonomy of an independent church in co-operation, mutual responsibility of both the sending church or mission and the church constituting itself as an independent Church, in order to help to answer the question:

Will the constituting churches be genuine Lutheran Churches bound to the infallible Word of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, bound to the pure doctrine of the Lutheran Church, or are those congregations that originated through the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments of Lutheran missionaries be observed and swallowed into the unionism and syncretism of the world wide ecumenical movement or into the mainstream of Protestantism?

The sending churches in Europe and America themselves have to decide whether they will be faithful to the eternal truth of the Word of God and to be also in future churches according to the pure doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions in order to want and to adhere to it or not.

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