

AUTONOMY IN A COVENANT POLITY

Donald Freeman

Every unit of the church, while in covenant with the other units, has a non-transferrable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it--God's will and way for it--in its time and place.

The above sentence is the working definition of autonomy proposed for churches with covenant polities in this essay. The remainder of the essay explains it. Whether the word "autonomy" is retained or not (and perhaps it is too abused and maligned to merit retention), associated with it are some very positive values for the church which need to be retained.

The primary context to which this essay refers is the United Church of Christ, which is coming more and more to define its polity in covenantal terms.

Background

Prized by some and detested by others, the assertion of local church autonomy, along with the autonomy of instrumentalities and institutions of the church, has been one of the most controversial features of the polity of the United Church of Christ. Long before the 1957 merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian churches to form the United Church of Christ, a concern for the freedom of the local church to manage its own life had been manifested not only among Congregational and Christian churches but, to a lesser extent, in Reformed and Evangelical church circles as well. Shortly before 1957, autonomy--of not only the local church but also the trustees of certain endowments and funds--was a key issue in some of the efforts in civil courts to block the union.

The *Basis of Union*, its *Interpretations*, and the *Constitution and Bylaws* were all fashioned in a context in which the very viability of the union depended in part on the assurance of local church autonomy, while at the same time the ongoing life of the merged church depended on the assurance of connectedness. Paragraph 15 of the *Constitution* (the paragraph on local church autonomy) is carefully set between paragraphs 14 and 16, which emphasize mutual relations among the various bodies and settings of the church, and both are in the context of a fundamental confession of faith in the Preamble (paragraph 2).

2. The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. . . .

14. The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility.

15. The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline and dismissal; to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it.

16. Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church.

DIMENSIONS OF AUTONOMY

The assertion of autonomy in paragraph 15 is, to be sure, pretty sweeping and uncompromising. It has been cited and acted out by a number of local churches in various relations and termination of relations with Associations and other settings of the church. But how is it to be understood constructively?

"Autonomy" as Responsibility: Freedom For, more than Freedom From

The word "autonomy" comes from classical Greek (*autos*, self; and *nomos*, portion, custom, pattern, law, from *nemein*, to allot) and means, fundamentally, *self-governance*. Perhaps the most influential use of the term for our own times was by the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant in the 1780s, whose ethic called for the highest sense of personal responsibility to define and manage oneself in the face of the multitude of voices and opportunities calling for our attention and response. Kant contrasted *autonomy* with *heteronomy*, governance by and dependence upon another or others outside oneself, and challenged all humans to "dare to use your own reason"--which he called "the motto of enlightenment." It is about being "of age."¹

However, Kant opposed the association of autonomy with any form of rampant individualism or libertinism. Autonomy is *fundamentally freedom for, not merely freedom from*. It is the highest level

¹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?* tr. and ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 51-69, 85-92.

of personal responsibility, not irresponsibility. To be sure, it entails a kind of freedom from the rule of others, but this is not a freedom to ignore what others command or have to say; it is freedom to listen, evaluate, decide and act for oneself through the highest exercise of rationality. It is not freedom from accountability, but accountability to the canons of reason which Kant believed to be at the core of human personhood. And although it is specifically personal, its domain is *civic, even "cosmopolitical," not merely private individual* life. For persons, autonomy refers to self-definition, self-mastery and self-government, but it also refers to one's manner of social existence and citizenship; on civic levels it is the self-governance of political units by their informed citizenry.

We humans have a seemingly inevitable talent for reductionism, however, and autonomy is often reduced from Kant's noble conception of responsibility to the very privatistic libertinism which Kant sought to avoid: merely freedom from. In the case of the United Church of Christ, the emphasis has often been on freedom from any and all forms of coercion or control from church authorities outside the local church or other unit itself.² And for lack of a confident characterization of autonomy in positive terms this negative definition has often ruled the day. This essay is an attempt to elaborate such a positive characterization.

Autonomy as Capacity to Covenant

The United Church of Christ has been characterized by Louis Gunnemann, in a now widely accepted phrase, as "a covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life--a relationship delineated but not regulated by a constitution and bylaws."³ Constituted by divine grace, what holds the United Church of Christ together from the human side are two things: (1) a common faith in "Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour" and "sole Head" of the church; and (2) sets of covenant promises exchanged by the units and persons of which it is thereby composed.

Autonomy has often been interpreted to mean "independence"--not simply non-dependence but atomistic separateness--and thus to authorize a "lone ranger" style of personal and church life. But the either/or of dependence/separateness is a false dichotomy. Mutuality, for instance, is neither, and indeed it has been argued that only persons and social units with a fairly clear sense of who they are--autonomy!--have what it takes to own covenants and maintain mutuality. Only such a sense of self and other can allow for both interpenetration and respect of boundaries at the same time. Very few human relationships involve parties who are equal in every regard, and only respect for the integrity of the other--autonomy!--can enable mutuality when the parties involved are not equal: for example, in terms of power.

Autonomy as Localized Responsibility

² Coercion or control from governmental sources is less often contested. The claim to autonomy is not always consistently made.

³ Louis H. Gunnemann, "Order and Identity in the United Church of Christ," *New Conversations* 4 no. 2 (Fall 1979), 15. Reuben A. Sheares elaborates on this in a manner very similar to the present essay in "A Covenant Polity," chap. 7 in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 67-78.

Paragraph 15 of the UCC Constitution can be read primarily as freedom *from*. It is full of phrases about "its own" [the local church's]: "its own affairs," "its own methods of organization," "its own covenants and confessions of faith," "its own way," "by such procedure as it shall determine." It is a "bill of rights."

But paragraph 15 can and cries out to be read as a list of *responsibilities* which the local church must assume for itself. All of the rights there listed are, at the same time, responsibilities. But for any church body *its fundamental responsibility is to discern the call of God to it--God's will and way for it--its mission--in its place and time.*

In such a discernment process, it is wise to turn to others for counsel, critique and support. That is what "associating" (Association) and "conferring" (Conference) are about. In many instances the ministry may be carried out collaboratively. But this is the most--and the least--the other units can offer; for although they stand in the same time, they do not stand in exactly the same *place*. *Only the local body stands in its place in its time, as Christ stands with it; and that is why it cannot ask others to make its decisions for it. This responsibility is non-transferrable.* Others may be able to do *with*, but they cannot do *for*. The same is true for an adult church member: other members provide counsel and support and may collaborate, but cannot do *for*.⁴

Autonomy and Ministries of Scale and Timeliness

Each church body has its own primary sphere of responsibility and influence, but in different settings the scope of that responsibility and influence has its own magnitude or scale. Thus the local church has the local social unit in which it is situated: a town, township, neighborhood or section of a city. Associations have their own more-or-less corresponding social units, such as counties or regions. Conferences have theirs, typically states or regions. The General Synod has its sphere: the nation--through instrumentalities such as the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries; and the world--through the United Church Board for World Ministries. The United Church of Christ is actively engaged in ecumenical bodies as well--locally, regionally, nationally and globally--that is, each UCC body in its own primary sphere of responsibility and influence.

The same can be said for each member: there is a personal, interpersonal and social sphere for which s/he is primarily suited in ministry, and for which no corporate church body is so well suited. But for a sphere on the scale of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the Pennsylvania Council on Interchurch Cooperation and Pennsylvania Council of Churches are better suited than any one member or local church or Association, for a united church voice on a matching (statewide) scale is more likely to be heeded than thousands of local church voices or dozens of judicatory voices by themselves.

This does not mean that these spheres of ministry are exclusive; in fact, they are intertwined by virtue of the democratic processes of citizenship in these United States of America. But it does suggest that there is an optimal scale of ministry for each member and each church body. The concept of autonomy

⁴ Collaboration is especially important as an embodiment and symbol of connectedness, as well as often more effective. But in the collaboration of covenant partners, the partner nearest to the issue--in whose primary sphere or on whose scale or terms the issue is best addressed--normally takes the lead.

underscores the specific, non-transferrable responsibility each has for its own primary sphere of ministry on its own scale.

A correlative virtue of this localization of responsibility for ministry is the ability of autonomous ministries to be *timely*. Each unit of the church is able to respond or to take initiative when the time is ripe or when the need cries out, because it is not necessary to work through other channels for authorization. Counsel from and collaboration with others is always desirable and to be sought when possible, but there may not be time to obtain it. There is riskiness in this virtue, to be sure: there have been times when the actions of one unit appear to have been hasty and ill-advised, regretted by others and sometimes by itself. But a strength of UCC polity is precisely this authority of each body--local, regional, national--and each member to discern the moment and minister accordingly.⁵

LIMITATIONS TO AUTONOMY

Autonomy, Authority, and Accountability

The authority of an autonomous body in a covenant polity, however, is not absolute or self-generated, and its accountability is not merely to itself. Authority flows from and accountability is to its relationship with the sole Head of the church, Jesus Christ. This has several implications.

- Christ is *sole* Head. Jesus is remembered to have challenged the disciples to lay down secular relations of lordship of some over others, rather to engage in mutual servanthood (Mark 10.35-45 and parallels). Autonomy is a way of saying that no body in any setting of the UCC has authority *over* any other body: Before Christ all are on equal footing.
- But each body *does* have authority *vis-a-vis* the others. Covenantal polity means that each is to be taken seriously, particularly as it embodies, gives voice to and lives out what it discerns to be God's will and way. This is the assertion of paragraphs 14 and 16 in the constitution.⁶
- Each body is accountable to all the others. Accountability calls for gracious confrontation--the grace of rejoicing in, bearing with, and forgiving one another--together with the courage to speak in love the truth which needs to be said (Ephesians 4.25), especially if covenantal ties appear to have been breached.

Communication among Autonomous Bodies and with the Public

Each body of the United Church of Christ has the responsibility, freedom and authority to speak its own mind--speak for itself--in and out of its particular place and time. Because no other body is precisely *there*, no other body can speak *for* it. But each can--and has the responsibility to--speak and listen *to* the others. It is appropriate for autonomous bodies in covenantal relations to suggest, request, recommend, urge and perhaps even (rarely, please) demand; to question, grieve, regret and perhaps even deplore; but not to command, require, order or condemn. Reuben Sheares called this the

⁵ Cf. time as *kairos* in the New Testament: "the *right* time."

⁶ It is a shortcoming of ¶16 that it states the relationship in one-way rather than mutual terms. ¶16 needs to be understood in the language of ¶14.

language of "soft verbs." It is the language of General Synod, Conferences, Associations, Local Churches, Instrumentalities and Institutions as they speak with one another.⁷

Frankly, this has sometimes proven frustrating for some persons. A case in point occurred at General Synod 19 (St. Louis, 1993), when a motion was introduced to *direct* the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to make some specific changes in the proposed *New Century Hymnal*. In the end the verb was changed to "recommend," and the Board's hymnal committee made some--but not all--of the changes recommended. The more general frustration, however, might be put this way: Is the *whole church* forever at the mercy of one or another of the autonomous bodies of which it is composed? Autonomy is sometimes experienced as "out of control," underlying which one might expect to find feelings of helplessness or impotence. Autonomy both enhances and limits power.

A related point of frustration and confusion around autonomy in the UCC is the question, Who speaks for the United Church of Christ? The General Synod, for instance, speaks for itself, and is not to be construed as speaking for all other bodies and settings of the church--even though it is made up of delegates from all of the conferences of the church, all of whom are members of local churches. The President of the church is a spokesperson for the General Synod; instrumentality executives are spokespersons for their instrumentalities; etc. But again there is the question, Is there no voice for the church as a whole?

Perhaps the most honest answer is "No and Yes." No, no body can ever presume to speak for every body of the United Church of Christ. But Yes, it can often be said, "We may not all be of one mind about this, but the prevailing mind of the United Church of Christ is" It may sometimes need to be added, "A sizeable minority, however,"

At this point this essay is advancing a point of view which is currently not widely held--and sometimes held suspect--in the UCC: the responsibility of leaders to *represent*. Representation is here to be understood in a specific and limited manner: that a designated leader in this church--by election, ordination, installation or other authorization--has a representative responsibility to *describe* to the church and to the public the convictions, positions and actions of the various bodies in the various settings of the church, and most particularly the body one is called and installed to serve. Insofar as one is *accurate* in such descriptions, one *can* be said to *speak for* the bodies whose actions are described. This is particularly true when the speaker has discerned a widespread consensus in the church. Local church pastors have a major responsibility--regrettably not always owned--to keep informed and to speak in this regard; and although not specifically charged with such responsibility, it behooves every member of the church to do the same.

⁷ Technically, there are constitutional mandates in respect of the various settings and instrumentalities; bodies which create other bodies as their agencies can command as well as terminate them. This is true, for instance, of the General Synod in relation to instrumentalities which it has *established*, but not those it has *recognized*. Even where harder verbs are legal, however, they are usually avoided because they violate the spirit, the ethos, of a covenantal style of life together. The harder verb, "direct," however, is more often found in directions to officers about implementation of actions; but even in these cases it is more in the spirit of propriety than command.

But secular media, the general public, and--regrettably--many UCC members are not disciplined to make these distinctions, especially if they are accustomed to institutional structures with more centralized controls. It is a never-ending responsibility to attempt to communicate the distinctive nature of the United Church of Christ in this regard, in order to honor and uphold the variety of convictions on various matters which exists throughout the church. But the church will be stronger and its leadership more effective when this representative responsibility is owned and exercised with courage and care.

Autonomy and Trust

It might appear that to abide in such a de-centralized church--one without a central mechanism of control--calls for an extraordinary amount of trust to be placed in a wide variety of human beings and institutions, plagued as they are by shortsightedness, limited perspectives, and sin. That is only one side of the truth. It takes an equally extraordinary amount of faith to believe that God, Christ, the Holy Spirit⁸ is truly present and active in the church in every generation, including our own; to trust that what comes forth from bodies of church people, imperfect as it may be, is in response to divine promptings; and to trust that therefrom--solely from this divine center--comes the common-mindedness toward which we all are called and for which, with greater and lesser degrees of agony and anxiety, we yearn.

CONCLUSION

Autonomy as responsibility in these five regards--self-definition and self-governance; covenanting in mutual respect; locality of scale as primary sphere of ministry; timeliness of response; and above all discernment of God's will--is a distinctive feature of a covenantal polity such as that of the United Church of Christ. Its positive virtue is that mission and ministry are thereby empowered and more likely to be effective. It is consistent with a church which believes that the Holy Spirit, or the Head of the Church, is truly present to guide whenever and wherever people of faith gather in the name and service of Christ. Perhaps the more theologically accurate term is *theonomy*, governance from God.

The United Church of Christ pays a high price to be this kind of church. The positive cluster of virtues associated with autonomy--by whatever name--will always run the risk of being distorted, perverted or reduced: Nothing good escapes that risk. Hence whereas autonomy runs the risk of reduction to independent libertinism without accountability, theonomy runs the risk of reversion to a new heteronomy--all things under external authority--with the inevitable issue over human interpreters, mediators or stand-ins for God. Some of us may find one of these risks more tolerable than the other, and *vice versa*. For now, at least, this essay is supportive of continuing "a covenanted relationship of autonomous bodies" while striving against the distortions to which autonomy may lend itself.

And so the essay ends as it began, with this proposed definition of autonomy for covenantal polities, and particularly for the United Church of Christ:

⁸ This is an historic confusion. Most protestant, Orthodox and sectarian systematic theologies have derived the doctrine of the church from the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; most Roman Catholic and some protestant theologies, from Christology

Every unit of the church, while in covenant with the other units, has a non-transferrable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it--God's will and way for it--in its time and place.

Lancaster Theological Seminary, January 1998

Revision of the article in *Prism*, vol 11 no 2, Fall 1996, pp. 17-25