

**Ecclesial autonomy as independence or interdependence?
A concise overview of the concept of ecclesial autonomy in the
early histories of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church
and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa**

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Abstract

The histories of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa depict a strong striving towards attaining a position of ecclesial autonomy and the acknowledgment of such autonomy by the Dutch Reformed Church. This article examines historical interpretations of the theological principle of ecclesial autonomy in relation to the mentioned churches. In the final instance, an understanding of ecclesial autonomy that points towards interdependence is proposed. As an outcome, this interpretation points towards the interdependent relationship of churches. Finally, with the article affirming the interdependence and interrelatedness of churches, an argument is proposed for the building of a vulnerable ecclesiology.

Introduction

When studying the histories of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) it becomes clear that these churches strove towards ecclesial autonomy in relation to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as the so-called “mother church”.¹ In this process it becomes clear that the particular churches had a very specific understanding of ecclesial autonomy and that this understanding, on a church

¹ See in this regard, C Loff, *Dogter of Verstoteling. Kantaantekeninge by die geskiedenis van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika*, 1991, Predikante Broederkring: Kaapstad; C Loff, *Bevryding tot Eenwording. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994*. Published Doctoral Dissertation, 1998, Kampen: Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.; Hannes Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou. Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die Apartheid in historiese perspektief*, 1982, Amsterdam: Rudopi.

juridical level, was directly linked with independence. It can be said that the DRMC and the DRCA understood ecclesial autonomy as independence from the DRC. The DRC, in turn, understood ecclesial autonomy as something that was to be achieved by the DRMC and the DRCA. Strictly speaking, such a position could only be reached once these churches had achieved, amongst other things, financial independence.²

It is thus safe to say that, for the mentioned churches, ecclesial autonomy was closely connected with the notion of independence and, as such, could not fail to have a direct impact on the ecclesiology of the DRMC and the DRCA. The question concerning the theological motivation for such an understanding of autonomy among the ranks of the mentioned churches can indeed be asked.

Relating to the topic of this article, this understanding of autonomy should be challenged. As will be pointed out, ecclesial autonomy can also have as outflow a relationship of interdependence between churches. This is a particular characteristic of the presbyterial-synodical church juridical structure of the Reformed churches. The impact of such an understanding of autonomy on the ecclesiology of the churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches will be explored further in the article. The ongoing process of the reunification of the churches that belong to the family of Dutch Reformed Churches will form the background for this discussion.

The main focus of this article falls on the period between 1881 and 1961. The reasoning behind this is found in the fact that the oldest “mission church” of the DRC, namely the DRMC, was established in 1881.³ 1961 signalled a new phase in the relational history of the DRMC, the DRCA and the DRC with the establishment of liaison committees between the mentioned churches (Van Rooi, 2010a, 189-191).

To appreciate why the specific understanding of ecclesial autonomy is found in the histories of the DRMC and the DRCA it is important to delve into the historical-contextual realities of these churches. As such, this article will give attention to two historical realities that impacted on the DRMC and the DRCA’s understanding of ecclesial autonomy, namely 1) the planting of the mentioned churches (with specific reference to the role of the missionary) and, 2) the impact of the so-called three selves theory on the ecclesiology of the churches. It can be argued that these historical realities form the

² For a concise overview of the notion of financial autonomy in the ranks of the ‘mission churches’ see J Combrink, ‘Die Taak van ons Kerk ten opsigte van die Nie-blankes’. Aantekeninge van ’n referaat gehou op die Teologiese dag, 17 Junie 1939. In *Op die Horison*, Jaargang I, July 1939, No. 3, 134. See also GC Olivier, ‘Selfstandigwording van die Bantoekekerke in Suid-Afrika’. In *Op die Horison*. Jaargang I. April 1939. No. 2. 76-78.

³ The Dutch Reformed Mission Church in the Orange Free State was formed in 1910. This church would later form part of the DRCA.

underpinnings of the DRMC and the DRCA's historical understanding of ecclesial autonomy.

The office of missionary and its effect on the model for church planting by the DRC

Any discussion relating to the planting of the DRMC and the DRCA by the DRC should, in our view, start with the DRC decision to actively commence missionary endeavours, and specifically with the synodical decision to institute the office of missionary. This historic and influential moment occurred during the 1824 Synod of the DRC. Not only was this the first Synod of the DRC held on African soil, but this Synod also took the decision to institute the office of missionary as a distinct office apart from the office of minister, and on 14 November 1824 the first missionary in the person of Leopold Marquard⁴ was ordained (*Reglementen* 1824:37).⁵ The main aim of this venture was to put the Church (DRC) on the path of active mission. Interestingly enough, it was decided that this could best be done if the missionary focused his (sic) ministry only on the Christianising and spiritual well-being of the "heathen". The separate institution of the office of missionary therefore came into existence in the mission context of the DRC. In this regard, the 1824 synodical resolution for the ordination of missionaries clearly stated that those ordained as missionaries would specifically serve the "heathen".

De Synode heeft vasgesteld, dat Zendelingen, Ledematen der Hervormde Kerk zynde, voortaan, as zy zulks verlangen, door en van wegens de Algemeene Kerkvergadering zullen kunnen worden geordend, om onder de Gemeenten, door hen uit de Heidenen verzameld, de Heilige Sacramenten te bedienen, onder die bepalingen, welke de Synode dienstig zal oordeelen, des aangaande te maken (Reglementen 1824:37).

With the institution of the office of the missionary by the first synod of the DRC in 1824 it became clear that missionary work would, from that time onwards, take place as an enterprise on its own and that the harvest of the mission would be treated as a separate part of the congregation/congrega-

⁴ It is interesting to note that, as time progressed and as more missionaries were ordained by the DRC, some of the ordained missionaries included missionaries who had formerly served in the ranks of the London Missionary Society (LMS).

⁵ It is therefore no surprise that Crafford notes that the decisions of this first synod had a great impact on the mission history of the DRC. See D Crafford, *Aan God die Dank. Geskiedenis van die sending van die Ned.Geref. Kerk binne die Republiek van Suid-Afrika en enkele aangrensende Buurstate*, Deel I, 1982, 36.

tional life and activities (Van Rooi 2010:39). The ministry of the missionary focussed on Christianising the “heathen” and, as noted earlier, he (sic) was not allowed to interfere with the ministry of the existing congregations. Crafford calls this the distinction between “*pastoraat*” (pastorate) and “*apostolaat*” (apostolate) (Crafford 1982:38). Both the institution of the office of the missionary and the subsequently formulated procedural rules for the ordination of missionaries that flowed from this had a major influence on the establishment by the DRC of separate mission churches for the so-called coloured and black peoples of Southern Africa (*Acta Synodi* 1926:1-5).

It can thus be stated that, although there were other reasons and practicalities that led to the establishment of the DRMC and the DRCA, this decision regarding a more structured and organised approach to active mission work paved the way for new and far-reaching developments within the DRC that continue to have an effect on the divisions within the broader family of Dutch Reformed Churches until this very day (Van Rooi 2010:30).⁶

The “three selves theory” and its impact on DRC thinking about mission

Some of the other major influences that impacted on DRC thinking concerning mission came from individuals such as Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson (an Anglo-Saxon) and Gustav Warneck (from Germany) (Van Rooi 2010:41). These Missiologists had an enormous impact, especially on church planting/the establishment of younger churches in the global protestant arena of the time.⁷ Their thinking also had a direct impact on the DRC in a context of rapidly growing awareness of mission. This was especially true of the work of Venn and Anderson. It therefore is not surprising that the so-called ‘three selves theory’⁸ of Venn and Anderson was regarded as normative for a long time and was used as justification for the development of a Dutch Reformed model and theology for planting younger churches (Van der Merwe 1967:41).⁹ The broader aim of the “three selves theory” was to

⁶ It should be remembered, however, that, with regard to the model of church planting, the DRC was indeed influenced by broader developments in Protestant missionary thinking at the time. See Smith, ‘Die planting van afsonderlike kerke vir nie-blanke bevolkingsgroepe deur die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika’, In *Annale*, 1973, 85. In this regard Van der Merwe notes that ‘(D)ie beleid van kerkplanting van die Ned. Geref. Kerk staan nie los van die denkrigings in Protestantse sendingkringe nie. Trouens die Ned. Geref. Kerk is in menigerlei opsig beslis deur sekere sendingdenkrigings beïnvloed’. See WJ van der Merwe, *Gesante om Christus Wil*, 1967, 39.

⁷ For an overview of the influence, especially of Venn and Anderson, on the decisions of the first World Missionary conferences see JJF Durand, *Una Sancta Catholica in Sendingperspektief*, 1961, 61-66.

⁸ According to this model, the characteristics of an autonomous mission church would be that it should be ‘self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating’.

⁹ See also Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology*, 2007, 44. With regard to the establishment of the DRMC, Prof WJ van der Merwe notes that ‘Die stigting van die Ned. Geref. Sendingkerk as

establish indigenous and autonomous mission churches.¹⁰ In this regard, Adonis notes that the focus of the DRC was more on Venn's understanding of the "three selves theory". In short, Venn was of the opinion that indigenous "mission churches" should be assisted by the "western churches" to grow towards autonomy (Adonis 1982:205).¹¹

Another stream of thinking on mission that had an enormous impact on the DRC came to the fore in Europe in the second half of the 19th century. This stream was embedded in the German missiological thinking that saw mission as closely related to the wellbeing of the (specific) *volk* (nation). From here on, the influence of Gustav Warneck, especially, was strongly present in the South African context.¹² With regard to the autonomy of the young church, the emphasis for Warneck fell on the self-governing of the church. But the autonomy of the young church depended on religious, spiritual and moral maturity (Durand 1961:79). The younger church was to be established among a specific *volk* and thus this church would be embedded in the language and practices – if not in contrast with Christianity – of the particular nation (Durand 1961:79-80).¹³ This had the effect of making the Christianising of the entire nation very important.

Regarding his view on the planting of churches, Van der Merwe was of the opinion that the DRC was more influenced by Anglo-Saxon and

'n afsonderlike kerk het die geleentheid geskep vir getuienis, Christelike diens betoon en ontluiking van leierstalent wat moeilik langs ander weë bereik sou kon word.' WJ van die Merwe, Godsdien, 139, in Erika Theron, *Die Kleurlingbevolking van Suid-Afrika. 'n Verslag van 'n komitee van die Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede (Sabra) insake die Kleurling*, 1964.

¹⁰ Durand notes that '(Tussen die gedagtes van Venn en Anderson bestaan daar 'n merkwaardige ooreenkoms, met die verskil dat, waar Venn die selfstandigheid van die jong kerk aan die end van 'n ontwikkelingsproses plaas, dit vir Anderson 'n gegewenheid van die begin is...'. See Durand, *Una Sancta*, 1961, 69 and Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur*, 1982, 63.

¹¹ 'Die kerke kan eers hul selfstandigheid bereik nadat hulle 'n periode van ontwikkeling deurgemaak het. In hierdie hele proses van ontwikkeling en selfstandigwording, speel die westerse kerk as die "moederkerk" die rol van voog (moeder) oor die Swartkerke.' And also 'in die praktyk kom dit daarop neer dat die drie Swartkerke ondergeskik is aan die blanke "moederkerk" en dat hulle nie as gelykwaardige kerke beskou en behandel word nie'. Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur*, 1982, 205. Regarding the opinion and outlook of Anderson, Van der Merwe notes that, as a Congregationalist, Anderson focussed on the growing into autonomy of the local congregation. See, in this regard, WJ van der Merwe, *Gesante om Christus Wil*, 1967, 41.

¹² 'Die aanhalings van die sendingkundiges van die Ned. Geref. Kerk skyn tog aan te dui dat die volkskerk, soos ons dit by Warneck vind, as ideaal voorgehou moet word. Die ideaal was skynbaar een kerk vir elke etniese groep.' See Van der Merwe, *Gesante om Christus wil*, 1967, 53. Adonis gives a brief outline of the missionary thinking of Warneck and stresses the enormous impact that this had on missionary thinking in the DRC. See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur*, 1982, 67.

¹³ With regard to the 'three selves theory' the term 'indigenous' was often replaced by the term 'national' with the focus on the establishment of separate churches for separate 'nations'.

German thinking than by any other Protestant thinking on mission, including that of the influential Reformed theologian and historical figure Gijsbertus Voetius (Van der Merwe 1967:48). This view is echoed by Smith when he points out that, except for an indirect influence on the DRC through the broader Dutch Reformed tradition, the work of Voetius had no real, deep and grounding impact on the DRC and, here especially, on her mission thinking (Smith 1973:83-96).¹⁴

In this regard it needs to be mentioned that, added to the mission theories of Venn, Anderson and Warneck, was a uniquely socially-constructed model that fitted in with growing tendencies towards racial segregation within the historical South African context, and which was concretised by the church in its policies (Van der Merwe 1967:89). From this grew a unique model that had as its aim the establishment of separate, autonomous, independent younger churches for the different cultural groups within Southern Africa under the strict guardianship of the DRC as so-called “mother church” (Van Rooi 2010:43). In my view this fact would find culmination in the infamous synodical decision of 1857.¹⁵ It is exactly on this point that the DRC strongly deviated from general missiological thinking within the Reformed ecclesial context.

It further needs to be mentioned that the sociopolitical history of South Africa, one characterised by cultural and economic segregation, further impacted on the historic model and theology for church planting of the DRC.

¹⁴ ‘Nie alleen bestaan daar geen dokumentêre aanwysings van enige direkte beïnvloeding nie, maar vertoon die planting en konstituering van die Ned. Geref. Dogterkerke ook te weinig tekens dat die beginsels van Voetius regstreeks nagevolg is.’ See Smith, ‘Die planting van afsonderlike kerke’, In *Annale*, 1973, 95. Smith further notes that ‘die primêre verskil tussen die beginsels vir kerkplanting soos deur Voetius uitgewerk en deur die Ned. Geref. Kerk in sy planting van die dogterkerke toegepas, dit blyk dat die moederkerk die gekonstitueerde dogterkerke nie gesien en erken het as kompleete kerk nie, maar eerder as afsonderlike institute waaroor die moederkerk hom geroepe geag het om as voog jurisdiksie uit te oefen.’ See Smith, ‘Die planting van afsonderlike kerke’, In *Annale*, 1973, 89.

¹⁵ At the Dutch Reformed synod on Friday, 6 November 1857, the following decision was taken on the proposal of Ds. A Murray (snr.), minister of the congregation of Graaff-Reinet: *De Synode beschouwt het wenschlijk en schriftmatig, dat onze ledematen uit de Heidenen, in onze bestaande gemeenten opgenomen en ingelijfd worden, overal waar zulks geschieden kan; maar waar deze maatregel, ten gevolge van de zwakheid van sommigen, de bevordering van de zaak van Christus onder de Heidenen, in de weg zoude staan, de gemeente uit de Heidenen opgerigt, of nog op te rigten, hare Christelijke voorregten in een afzonderlijk gebouw of gesticht genieten zal.* See in this regard *Acta Synodi*, DRC, 1857, 59-60. This proposal was accepted by a majority vote of Synod after a lengthy discussion. An English translation of this synodical translation is found in GM Verstraelen-Gilhuis, ‘Church conflict and Black Theology in South Africa’, and reads as follows: ‘It was desirable and in accord with the Holy Scripture that new black Christians be accepted and initiated into existing congregations. But where on account of the weakness of some, that is of white members, this was not possible, arrangements could be made for black Christians to meet in separate buildings’. See FJ Verstraelen *et al.* *Missionly. An Ecumenical Introduction. Texts and contexts of global Christianity*, 1995, 283.

One of the outflows of the abovementioned models for the planting of churches, namely that of guardianship, was further influenced by a strong paternalistic ecclesiology that impacted on the relationship between the DRC and the DRMC and DRCA. It is therefore no surprise that a specific understanding of autonomy, namely one characterised by a search towards independence, existed in the ranks of the mentioned churches.¹⁶

In the following section a brief overview of the concept the *Lordship of Christ*¹⁷ will be given. This concept is used as a lens to interpret ecclesial autonomy.

The Lordship of Christ: towards a Reformed understanding of ecclesial autonomy

Can one speak of ecclesial autonomy when the “planted church” reaches the stage at which it takes full responsibility for itself and thus controls all its affairs? This is a question that touches the heart and nature of a Reformed understanding of what a church is (Van Rooi 2010:114). Therefore, the question that needs to be asked is, when can a church/congregation be regarded as truly Church in its own right, i.e. when is a church truly Church?¹⁸

The authority of the church is not, and can never be, a human construct as her authority lies in and through God. “In the New Testament we see that the authority in the church is inextricably and intimately connected with the authority of Christ, the Head of the Church” (Ciobotea 2005:91). This is in line with Reformed thinking that points towards the fact that the autonomy of the local church is given to it directly by God. Autonomy, as such, can never mean that the (local) church is autonomous *from God* in the sense that it is a complete church and thus does not have to stand under the Lordship of Christ (Van Rooi 2010:134). As such, every local church is part of the worldwide church, and yet every “part” is fully Church (Koffeman 2001:87). From his perspective as a world-renowned Roman Catholic theologian, Küng states the following:

¹⁶ For an excellent overview of the effect and struggle from the guardianship of the DRC over the DRMC see CJ Botha, ‘Belhar – A century-old protest’, In GD Cloete & DJ Smit (eds.), *A moment of truth. The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982. 1984.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

¹⁷ Own Italicisation.

¹⁸ The Reformation has put great emphasis on the Biblical directive that every local church is truly and completely church. In line with this it should be noted that, from a Reformed perspective, any discussion of the autonomy of the church starts with a focus on the local congregation. In this regard Van der Merwe notes that the autonomy of the local church should therefore stand central in ecclesiological discussions about the church. For him, autonomy arises at the establishment of a local congregation and not when a synod is constituted. See in this regard, Van der Merwe, *Gesante om Christus Wil*, 1967, 55-56.

But each (local congregation) is truly God's ecclesia and Christ's body because the Lord is present in each, truly, wholly and undivided. And because it is the same Lord who is truly, wholly and undivided present in each community, these communities do not exist side by side in isolation, nor even in loose federation, but they are all together in the same Spirit, the one ecclesia of God, the one body of Christ, and through koinonia, communion, fellowship with him they are in koinonia, communion and fellowship with one another (Küng 1973:236).¹⁹

Küng thus shares a strong sentiment with the Reformed ecclesial tradition. In this is found the key to the interpretation of the term "ecclesial autonomy". Autonomy in this sense forms the basis of any form of relationship/correspondence between churches. It can thus be said that churches can stand only in a decent relationship with one another, and they can work towards visible and structural unity only if they acknowledge each other as equal in status as church(es) in Christ. This notion is based on theological argumentation. It needs to be made clear once again that this "status", i.e. the autonomy of the church, is not a human construct, but flows from the church's relationship to Christ – a relationship that points out that the Church belongs to Christ (Van Rooi 2010:143).

As such, the Church stands in direct relationship to Christ as Lord over His Church. The church belongs to Christ and therefore the Church is only and truly church in Christ (Jonker 1962:20); as such, Christ is embodied by the Church (Visser 't Hooft 1947:88).²⁰ Christ governs His Church as its King.²¹ Therefore, ecclesial autonomy should primarily be understood from the perspective of Christ's Lordship (Smit 1964:25). Bouwman, who places great emphasis on the voluntary coming together of believers to form a congregation, notes that the church is indeed not a society where members come and go as they please. For him, the authority of the church comes from above; from the head of the Church, ie Christ. Or, as Bouwman states:

De kerkvorm is dan ook niet eene liefhebberij, die afhangt van de willekeur der leden. Zij sluiten zich niet aanneen evenals de leden eener Vereeniging, die samenkomen tot een bepaald doel. Neen, de autoriteit, die in de kerk zeggenschap heft, komt

¹⁹ It is of vital importance for the Church that it allows Christ to be its head; otherwise it cannot be His body. See Küng, *The Church*, 1973, 236.

²⁰ 'De opgestane Heer zet Zijn werk in de wereld voort en is tegenwoordig in en door de Kerk'. See Visser 't Hooft, *Het Koningschap*, 1947, 88.

²¹ 'De Koning regeert, maar Hij regeert af het Kruis en door het Woord'. See Visser 't Hooft, *Het Koningschap*, 1947, 92.

van boven, van Christus, die het Hoofd zijner kerk is
(Bouwman 1928:65).²²

Thus, in the context of the Reformed church polity, relatedness is expressed through the presbyterial-synodical church juridical structure.

The concept of Christ's Lordship over His Church is an important aspect in the context of mission and, here, especially concerning the planting of churches. Christ Himself constitutes a church. This places great emphasis not only on the role of the members in the church but also on the relationship between the members of the church. As the church is universal, it is also true for relations between different churches.

Christ is Lord over His Church and, therefore, the Church stands in direct and special relation to Him. The Church receives its authority in and through Christ. Any other relational construct of the Church flows from this. This being the case, one could also speak of the *Christonomy* rather than of the *Autonomy* of a church (Van Rooi 2010:146).

From his perspective as a Reformed theologian, Willie Jonker notes that we, as believers, should always remember that the church can never belong to us (Jonker 1962:22). This is one of the primary principles of the Reformed church polity and ecclesiology and it has direct implications for both the missional context and for the relationship between churches in general. Coertzen is in agreement with this, thus noting the following: (*Een van die bekende kenmerke van Calvyn se kerkordelike denke is die unieke posisie wat Christus daarin neem. Die sg. Alleenheerskappy van Christus in die kerk* (Coertzen 1989:2). Coertzen continues by pointing out that this is clearly illustrated in the earliest Dutch confessions (Coertzen 1989:14).

Thus, Reformed church polity should always take into account that Christ alone governs His Church. For Jonker, the foundation for Reformed church polity is found in the Lordship of Christ. Or, as he states: *Dat Jesus Christus die Hoof en Here van Sy kerk is en as Koning direk en persoonlik oor Sy kerk regeer, is die grondwaarheid waarvan die kerkreg moet uitgaan* (Jonker 1965:3). Jonker calls this governance of Christ over His Church *genade-heerskappy* (a governance of grace) (Jonker 1965:15).

Therefore, we should continuously remind ourselves that we do not measure the quality of a church; Christ qualifies His Church. We do not hand autonomy to a church as a gift for showing signs of what we constructed; the autonomy of a church is found solely in Christ. In this is found the challenge for the Church to become what it is. This is true of both "younger" and "older" churches, as well as of churches of different cultural and ecclesias-

²² In line with Calvin, Bouwman notes that '*Die regeering der gemeente is een christocratie*'. See Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1928, 72.

tical traditions. This is true of the church both locally and universally. Christ continuously governs, sustains and qualifies His Church.

Visser 't Hooft's opinion is that a church that takes the Lordship of Christ seriously will continuously work towards the restoration of the unity of Christ's Church (Visser 't Hooft 1947:105). This is reiterated by Jonker when he states that: *(D)ie eenheid is in Christus gegee. Die gemeenskaplike beslotenheid in Hom as die Hoof bring vanself die onderlinge eenheid van die lede van sy liggaam mee* (Jonker 1965:37). For Visser 't Hooft this is no cheap unity but rather a costly and constant seeking of the will of God in every situation. Because of this the church cannot be satisfied with good working relations. It should seek to find a full expression of its unity in Christ.²³ This understanding of unity should find a particular expression in the ecclesiology of the church.

In the sections that will follow, a specific expression of ecclesiology, namely an *ecclesiology of vulnerability*, is proposed. The notion of a vulnerable ecclesiology is built on the interdependence and interrelated nature of churches and has as outflow a proposed impact on the structure of the church, its polity, its understanding of diversity – including diversity in confession – and a possible model that impacts on the planting of churches. As will be pointed out, the notion of an ecclesiology of vulnerability impacts directly on the process of the re-unification between the churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches.

Ecclesial autonomy as *independence or interdependence?*

As mentioned, the histories of the family of Dutch Reformed Churches point to a striving to reach a position of ecclesial autonomy.²⁴ This developed from a very specific understanding and interpretation of ecclesial autonomy that had as effect the notion that autonomy for the DRMC and the DRCA was

²³ 'Daarom kunnen wij niet tevreden zijn met een goede verstandhouding tussen de kerken onderling en interkerkelijke samenwerking in aangelegenheden van gemeenschappelijk belang'. See Visser 't Hooft, 1947, 106-107.

²⁴ It can be mentioned that this struggle for ecclesial autonomy is not unique to the context of the DRMC and the DRCA. The history of the DRC itself clearly points out that this church was also involved in a struggle for autonomy for a large part of its history. It needs to be pointed out that this struggle was largely against the direct control over and the interference of the government of the Cape Colony in the affairs of the DRC. For an overview of the history of the DRC specifically in relation to the struggle towards autonomy of the DRC over and against the direct control of the colonial government over this church, see JD Vorster, *Die kerkregtelike ontwikkeling van die kaapse kerk onder die kompanjie. 1652-1795*. Published doctoral dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University. 1956; EPJ Kleynhans, *Die kerkregtelike ontwikkeling van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika. 1795-1962*. Published doctoral dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University. 1973.

something to aspire towards or something that had to be attained (Van Rooi 2010:195).

One of the effects of the gradual growth towards autonomy was that the DRMC and the DRCA, at certain stages in their histories, understood their autonomy to be equal to independence from the DRC. Independence, therefore, was something aspired to.²⁵ In taking into account the history of these churches, one can understand how this indeed could have been the case. In this regard, the effect of the model for the planting of churches that was followed by the DRC should not be underestimated. One other factor that impacted directly on the DRMC and the DRCA in their striving towards the acknowledgement of their autonomy, as well as on their increasing sense of reaching independence from the DRC, can be found in the socio-political history of South Africa (Van Rooi 2010:199). Although this article does not specifically address this question it is insightful to note the sociopolitical history of South Africa at the time and how it directly influenced the ecclesial histories of the DRC, the DRMC and the DRCA.

The previous section points towards a specific understanding of ecclesial autonomy found in the acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ over His Church and towards the effect of this theological concept on the relations between churches. According to this understanding, ecclesial autonomy is something that every church possesses and that is inherently part of a gathering of believers. As such, it is also inherent in the structures of a constituted church and should thus be expressed in ecclesial structures.

Because Christ gathers His Church, the completeness of a church is found in this very relationship with Christ. This does not deny the fact that a church experiences certain patterns of growth and development in structure, polity, and financial liberty. However, such developments can never be measures or indicators of ecclesial autonomy as they do not belong to the essence of being church. Ecclesial autonomy, as a theological construct, does not have the same meaning as completion in a juridical sense (Van Rooi 2010:200).

This understanding of ecclesial autonomy has definite implications. It points towards a self-understanding whereby Christ is the Head of the church and whereby the church stands in a very specific relationship to Christ as its Lord. Thus, the relationship between churches is, in essence, determined by this confessed reality. These relationships point towards interdependence and an equal relationship under Christ's governance. This should be expressed in every sphere of the being of the church, including its outlook on mission, its doctrine, structure, and polity. It has as basis the deep relationship that Christ has with His Church (Van Rooi 2010:201). The relatedness between Christ

²⁵ This is clearly expressed in the Synodical decisions and Acts of the DRMC and the DRCA between 1881-1994.

and His Church should thus find expression in the relationship between churches. The relatedness among churches can best be expressed by interdependence, over and against a sense of independence.²⁶ It can be argued that an understanding of ecclesial autonomy that expresses the direct relationship and interdependence of churches sets the tone for what can be called an ecclesiology of vulnerability.

Towards an ecclesiology of vulnerability

In an article on the vulnerability of the Church, Koffeman asks the following questions: What does it mean to take vulnerability seriously in ecclesiology? Is something like a 'vulnerable ecclesiology' possible?²⁷ These questions can be answered only if the term is more clearly defined. In this article, the notion of an ecclesiology of vulnerability is closely connected with the interdependent relationship between churches. As such, an ecclesiology of vulnerability points towards an ecclesiology characterised by reliance, openness and brokenness. It thus directly impacts on the understanding of being church, as a church embodying such an ecclesiology is characterised by vulnerability, interrelatedness, brokenness and continuous growing towards completion in Christ.

The key to understanding the vulnerable nature of the church as expressed in ecclesiology is through an understanding or interpretation of the interdependent relationship between churches. As noted, ecclesial autonomy is manifested in an interdependent relationship between churches. This interdependent nature of the church needs to come to a particular expression in an ecclesiology characterised by vulnerability – something that belongs to the essence of the church, in the words of Koopman (Koopman 2008:241). If this is the case, it becomes clear that churches – and indeed also local congregations – should never try to function as independent entities but as interdependent bodies that form part of the one body of the one Christ (Van Rooi 2010:203). In the interdependent nature of churches one finds a fuller expression of what Church, as the body of Christ, is.

According to Koffeman there are many ways to understand this vulnerability. He mentions the aspects of physical vulnerability (vulnerability related to the perceived size and power of a church); moral vulnerability (the moral vulnerability of the members of the church, and also its violent quality as expressed in the structures/polity of the church); communicative vulnerability (open to fair criticism and debate, and ready to learn from new

²⁶ Ecclesial autonomy too often leads to a sense of independence. This proposed understanding of ecclesial autonomy, however, leaves no room for independence. In fact, the opposite is argued for, namely that ecclesial autonomy should be an expression of interdependence.

²⁷ Leo Koffeman, 'The vulnerable nature of the church – ecclesiological observations'. To be published paper. 2

experiences – the value of this is that “it resists being caught up in the mentality of perpetrator and victim”); and compassionate vulnerability (the public witness and mission of the church in relation to a vulnerable world).²⁸ It suffices to say that, for Koffeman, vulnerability in the church is not something abstract; it is something that can indeed be experienced and structurally expressed. For him, an expression of this vulnerability is found particularly in the liturgy.²⁹

The question of how the notion of a vulnerable ecclesiology relates to and impacts on churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches can indeed be asked. In this regard it can be argued that the churches mentioned above should strive towards embodying an ecclesiology of vulnerability. This vulnerability should find particular expression in the inherent relatedness of, and interdependence between, these churches. This relatedness can best be expressed in the structural re-unification of the family of Dutch Reformed Churches.

Conclusion

As mentioned in this article, the notion of ecclesial autonomy is a recurring theme in the histories of the DRMC and the DRCA. For the largest parts of their histories these churches have occupied a subordinate position in relation to the DRC. This has impacted on the relations between the mentioned churches.

The specific interpretation and practical outflow of the role and place of the missionary, as well as the subsequent influence of the so-called “three selves theory” of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson on the missionary outlook of the DRC, led to an understanding of the “selves” as characteristics belonging to the essence of a church.³⁰ As a direct outflow of this, the autonomy of the DRMC and the DRCA was measured by the “three selves”, specifically on the basis of the principle of being self-supporting. In line with the socio-political and cultural constructs of the time, the DRC acted as a “mother church”, evaluating the autonomy of the so-called “daughter churches”. This directly impacted on the ecclesial identity, theological framework of, as well

²⁸ See Leo Koffeman, ‘The vulnerability of the church - ecclesiological observations’. To be published paper. 3 & 4.

²⁹ For Koffeman, the liturgy should be the point of departure of ecclesiological thinking. See Koffeman, ‘The vulnerable nature of the church – ecclesiological observations’. To be published paper. 11.

³⁰ Bosch points towards this danger by noting that ‘(T)en eerste bestaan daar die besliste gevaar om enigteen van hierdie drie “selwe” tot doel in sigself te verhef, asof ’n kerk se sêlfonderhoud, sêlfregering en sêlfuitbreiding tot sy wese behoort’. See DJ Bosch, ‘Die Sêlfonderhoud van die Inheemse Kerke. Is dit vir ons waarlik ’n saak van erns?’, in *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal*, Sept 1962, 482.

as the understanding of ecclesial autonomy by the DRMC and the DRCA – an understanding that at stages is synonymous with independence.

This article argues in favour of a specific understanding of ecclesial autonomy that stands in contrast to the above-mentioned. Such an understanding is built on the Reformed understanding of the Lordship of Christ and points towards the interrelatedness of churches. It is further characterised by an ecclesiology of vulnerability, which, as has been pointed out, has implications for the relations between the churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches.

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