THE GENIUS OF THE AUTONOMOUS CHURCHES IN LATIN AMERICA

by Carlos T. Gattinoni

I cannot claim for this paper the adjective of "scholarly." I did not have within my reach the whole documentation that would be needed for such an accomplishment, and therefore I may stand corrected in some instances, though I believe that the picture taken as a whole is a true one.

Too, I must admit to a certain provincialism, for I have treated only the autonomy of the churches springing from the British Conference of the Methodist Church and from The United Methodist Church in the U.S.A. There are perhaps other existent autonomous churches grown on other branches of Methodism which I have not taken into consideration.

A Bit of History

Autonomy has a very long history. The first autonomous church in Methodism was, of course, that of America. This took place in 1784 in Baltimore, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed. I suppose it is not intended for me to describe today the genius of this great Church. But it must be said that such an autonomy was the natural outcome of the political and social conditions of the time. As Bishop William R. Cannon says, its peculiarity lies in that "as an ecclesiastical institution, American Methodism antedates that of England. It also antedates by four years the organization of the colonies into the United States of America."

Exactly one hundred years elapsed before we hear of autonomy in America again. This time it happened in the West Indies. It was an autonomy not welcomed by the local church, and imposed upon it by the British Conference. This autonomous church struggled from 1884 to 1903, when it foundered and was accepted again by the British Church as a missionary field.

Hugh Sherlock mentions several causes for this failure, the first of which, if decisive, should cause the autonomous Church in Argentina to tremble! Inadequate finance. Grants from England stopped. The majority of the 43,000 members were poor. The Church was burdened with debts, and was almost bankrupt in its current account. Ministers were inadequately paid. Other causes mentioned were the difficulty, expense and uncertainty of travel conditions, lack of a ministerial training institution, and insufficient lay participation in spite of the fact that the conferences were constituted by an equal number of ministers and laymen.

Almost fifty years later, in 1930, we see the birth of two autonomous churches—one in Mexico, the other in Brazil. The Church
in Mexico became autonomous because of political reasons. The liberal and nationalist revolution laid severe restrictions on foreigners to fulfill their ministry. So the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South joined in the autonomous Methodist Church of Mexico. This church fashioned its structure on the pattern of the mother churches, with an important innovation. The bishops were not elected for life, but for four-year terms, though subject to re-election.

The Church in Brazil became autonomous because of the inability of the mother church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to appoint a resident bishop for the Brazilian Church. Again, this Church shaped its structure according to the prevailing patterns in the mother church.

These churches grew in numbers, yet autonomy was not an unmixed blessing. Both churches became isolated from the rest and had to struggle with problems arising from such an isolation. Perhaps there is a relation between this isolation and the conservatism that has characterized both churches taken as a whole, though surely with notable exceptions.

By this time the churches in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Panama, and Costa Rica (having altogether less than 20,000 members), became closely related to each other through the Central Conference system, which gave them a precarious degree of autonomy. The Central Conference elected the two bishops. Here again episcopacy was not a life-term office. They were elected for four years with the possibility of being re-elected. In the next-to-last period of its history the Central Conference limited the possibility of re-election to three periods.

In the 1950's and 60's, trouble arose for the Central Conference. Two of its decisions, which had been appealed, were overruled by the Judicial Council, with arguments that were far from convincing. A gentlemen's agreement was entered upon by the delegates of both areas. "Never again shall any one of us appeal a decision of the Central Conference." But the Judicial Council went further and ruled as unconstitutional the provisions of the Discipline that gave a meager legislative authority to the Central Conference. Thus the very existence of the Central Conference was called into question. A gentlemen's agreement is not a strong enough juridical basis on which to operate, especially if one bears in mind that the delegations to each Central Conference included persons that were not involved in the original agreement.

So the years 1969-70 became the years of autonomous churches. This was the result of the authorization given by the 1968 General Conference, and the work of COSMOS, as well as of local church committees and conferences. At the same time the Methodist Church of Brazil took a long look at its structures and thoroughly
changed them, and many of its new features are quite similar to the ones in the other countries. Even before that time the Church in Brazil had decided to adopt a term episcopacy instead of a life tenure one.

But antedating these churches by a year or two was the emergence of the Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas on May 18, 1967. This was the second birth of the autonomy in what was known as the West Indies.

The churches in Panama and Costa Rica have not achieved autonomy yet, but they are in serious conversations with the churches of the Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, with the intention of establishing a united autonomous church in that region of Central America.

Autonomy—is this a sign of the times?

**Dangers to Be Avoided**

In order not to end on a negative note, let me begin by stating what seem to me to be some of the dangers that lurk by the road of the autonomous churches. The first danger of course is isolation, with its corresponding lack of communication. This could easily allow the isolated church to develop peculiarities, to which it might cling believing them to be essential elements of their Methodist heritage, when really they do not belong to this inheritance at all.

This would mean that the church could fall into mental narrowness, with a tragic result of stagnation. The full fellowship with other churches, shocking though at times it may be, helps the churches to get rid of their peculiarities and to gain strength for their convictions though they may at times differ from those very same churches from which they profit by thus entering into fellowship with them.

Another danger similar to the above mentioned one is that the isolated church may easily become absorbed by other trends even unwittingly. Some could fall into a theological fundamentalism with its correspondent dogmatism. Some could become so open-minded to other theological trends as to lose character without creating a truly ecumenical theology. Worse still, there is the danger of falling into syncretism, even with non-Christian ideas, and with philosophical or ideological fads. In all this, the peril is that of losing essential things while grasping almost feverishly non-essential ones.

A further danger is discouragement. The autonomous church is sometimes exceedingly small. The forces against which it must struggle may seem to be superior to its own powers and ability. They may lack a leadership that is able and well enough trained. They may lack a firm financial basis on which to operate. And though discouragement does not go along very well with a radiant
faith, it is a fact that many times in history church leaders have become discouraged.

Another peril is that the church should fall prey to a nationalism that is exclusive. Nationalism is one of the strong trends of the times. There are positive values in it, such as self-respect, love of one's own fellowmen, etc., but if nationalism becomes exclusive, it turns out to be bigotry and the great danger is to fall before and worship false gods.

Realizing these dangers the autonomous churches in Latin America have created the Council of Evangelical Methodist Churches in Latin America in order to find a regional togetherness that may leave open doors to mutual help. They have even established a Latin American Judicial Council to which any of the churches can turn if they deem it necessary to solve some internal problem. Lack of adequate financial support may turn this ideal into a mere expression of desires, with no more strength than that of the paper on which it is printed. (The Caribbean Church has not yet officially joined this Council.)

Relevancy—A Feature

A salient feature of these autonomous churches is their effort to relate more significantly to their own countries. In this sense they become more nationalistic in a wholesome sense. They cease to feel in any way as foreigners among their own people.

The participation of the Bolivian Church in the life of the nation is shown in its voluntarily joining in the process of transformation that is taking place there. The autonomy in Cuba is an answer to the political situation prevailing in that country. The Uruguayan Church has taken a leading part in an effort of reconciliation—which failed—between the Government and the Tupamara movement. These are outstanding cases, but in the rest of the countries you will find present the same tendencies. No one ought to think that this is obtained without struggle within the churches. As with the church elsewhere, in these autonomous churches the polarization between conservatives and revolutionaries goes painfully on, threatening if not with a division, at least with a loss of enthusiasm or loyalty to the church. This situation cannot be imputed though to the autonomous condition of these churches. At least this can be said: The autonomous church experiences a new freedom to face the national problems. It can speak to its nation as part of it. Each of these churches has spoken on different occasions to its nation. Probably the outstanding example is Bolivia, where from the outset Bishop Arias sent out a notable document entitled, “A Manifesto to the Nation.”

All of these churches are concerned in finding out what is the real mission of the church today. Pluralism is an inescapable fact
for them. It is their destiny whether or not they like it. But again, though this is not the result of autonomy, it is a fact that makes itself acutely felt in the autonomous situation.

**Flexibility in Structure**

Another characteristic of the autonomous church is its flexibility in matters of structure. Previously in order to change any part of its structure these churches needed to be able to convince the delegates to the General Conference, of which they were an insignificant minority. What is worse, they had to suffer changes in their structure for which they did not care, or the need for which was not at all apparent to them.

Because the power of decision was brought closer home, the possibility of changes deemed necessary for the better fulfillment of the mission of the church increased immeasurably. And in some cases this is accentuated by the fact that their assemblies meet every two years, and even annually in some cases. In shaping their structure these churches have shown a real concern that these structures might enable them to fulfill in a better way their mission.

But they have not all followed the same patterns. Some have remained more closely similar to the structures of the mother churches, as in Mexico and perhaps in Chile. Others have moved to a more radical departure from the inherited ways, as in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, and in its last reforms, Brazil. Uruguay has gone as far as to eliminate the bishopric altogether and has instead a president and a kind of collegiate government. Of course, the Caribbean Church has no bishop, but in this it has not departed from the inherited system of the British mother church.

This flexibility is shown in that even within the autonomous church, the structures are not the same in all places. For example, in Bolivia, Argentina, and others, the local church can choose among four different patterns of local organization, and not all the Regions have the same arrangements for functioning as such.

I have already mentioned the limitations in the bishops' tenure. This fact points to a different conception of the episcopacy. In most of these churches the emphasis is on the pastoral function of the bishop rather than on his administrative responsibility. This is especially emphasized in the case of Argentina, where it is expected that the bishop will have as little to do with administrative matters as he possibly can. The authority of the bishop is shared with others even in the appointment of ministers.

Let me explain, by way of illustration, the system in Argentina. The bishop presides over a General Commission of Ministry and Appointments, formed by the seven regional superintendents and five laymen, all elected by the General Assembly. This Commission appoints the itinerant ministers to the Regions. In each of these
there is a Regional Committee on Ministry and Appointments, 
presided over by the Superintendent and composed mostly of lay­
men. This Regional committee appoints the ministers to the local 
churches or to specialized work within the Region.

In most of the other churches the General Board on Ministry 
(under whatever name it functions) makes the appointments di­
rectly to the churches. But in most of them the appointing is done 
collectively and not by the bishop himself. (It may be of interest 
to know that in Argentina the minister as he is moved from one 
church to another is appointed for four years, and from then on 
yearly.)

Centralized and Decentralized Government

Some of the churches maintain quite a centralized system of 
government. It will be surprising to some to learn that here we 
must mention as an example the Uruguayan Church. There the 
power is concentrated in the Executive Council presided over by 
the President of the Church (or the Vice President, who must be 
a layman if the President is a minister, and vice-versa). But neither 
of them presides necessarily over the Assembly, which elects its 
own president.

In other churches they have moved towards a decentralized 
authority. In Brazil, for example, each Region elects its own bishop, 
and each Region has its own boards with a large degree of authority. 
The same principle obtains in the Argentina arrangement, and to 
a lesser degree in the Bolivian one.

In several of these churches the delegates to the General Con­
ference are not elected by the local churches but by the Regions 
(districts). This system has assured a far higher quality of lay 
representation at the Conference than was the case with the annual 
conferences.

In some churches, as in Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, the principle of 
equal representation of laymen and ordained ministers in the Re­
gional and General Assemblies prevails. In others, as the Caribbean 
and Argentina, a majority of laymen is assured for these gatherings. 
In all cases the laity has a larger responsibility in the power of 
decision of the church.

This decentralization takes place in the case of the Church in 
Argentina at least, at another level. The General Assembly elects 
three bodies, namely: The Board of Life and Mission, the Admin­
istrative Board, and the Commission on Ministry and Appointments. 
The three come together as the General Board (which is the execu­
tive committee for the General Assembly between sessions), pre­
sided over by the bishop. But each of the first two elects its own 
chairman. They all work independently. The General Board simply 
has oversight of the total work. The Board of Life and Mission
thinks out the strategy of the church and makes proposals to the General Assembly, and in the interim periods to the General Board. All questions of administration in finances and organization go to the Board of Administration. All questions relating to the ministry and appointments fall under the Commission on Ministry. So the power is not concentrated in a single group, but shared with others.

Each Region has more autonomy with the church, and the program of the church as a whole is worked out at this regional level, a fact that once more gives the lay leadership a wider responsibility.

The Ministry

Let us now look at the conception of the ministry in these churches. All agree that Jesus Christ is the Supreme Minister, and that all His people are called to share in His ministry to the world. At the same time they admit a separate and representative ministry of ordained men and women. There are, however, different nuances. Bolivia has discarded the word “ministers” and prefers to designate them as “commissioners”.

All of these churches have brushed aside the notion that the deaconate is a step prior to eldership and that a man is to be ordained twice. The argument that this notion has been historically established is answered by saying that a mistake that has perpetuated itself through the centuries may become an historical mistake but continues to be a mistake after all to the bitter end. Therefore, in these churches deacons and elders exist as two orders within the ministry and one is not inferior to the other. Both exist in their own right. But their interpretation of the deaconate differs from one church to another. For some it means those who are devoted to social service work. For others it means any specialized ministry. Some still call deacons the local or regional ministers, and reserve the name “elder” for the itinerant ones. There is among these churches universal agreement as to eldership. For them an elder is a “minister of the word” and is a pastor. (This can be interpreted in the traditional way or in new fashions.)

Then there are the itinerant ministers and the regional or local ones. The itinerant elders and deacons are at the full disposition of the church. The disposition of the local ones is limited to the regional area or city. Some of these local ministers are full-time ministers, others are part-time ones. All churches require for the itinerant elders a full theological training.

The Local Congregation

Several of the churches have stated explicitly in their Disciplines that the only requirement to become a member of the church is faith in Christ and no discrimination (including that of race or political ideas) is to bar anyone from the fellowship of the church.
In most of the churches an important place is given to the assembly of the local church. This assembly or conference is formed by all confirmed members of the congregation above a certain age, varying from sixteen to twenty-one. This local assembly is to meet at least once a year and elects the official board and other officers of the local church. In the case of Bolivia, the assembly takes the place of the quarterly conference. In Uruguay the quarterly conference has disappeared altogether. In Argentina the official board meets in a Connectional Session once a year, presided over by the Regional Superintendent. (It may meet extraordinarily more frequently if needed.) In other countries the quarterly conference is kept, though not meeting quarterly.

The organization of the local church is not uniform. And, as already stated, in some of these autonomous churches the local congregation can choose among different possible types of local organization.

In a sense, though, the local congregation has surrendered certain powers to the Regional organization, thus reversing the usual principle of bringing the decisions closer to the place of witness, which has governed mainly the autonomous system.

A Summary

We could sum up the salient features of the autonomous churches in Latin America in the following statements:

The autonomous churches are intent on being relevant to the situation in which they find themselves, and are imbued by a wholesome nationalism. In other words, autonomy favors the indigenization of the church.

The autonomous churches have a structural flexibility that allows them to change their shape whenever the fulfillment of their mission calls for such changes. In any case, they are freed from the necessity of carrying a burden of structure for which they have no use and that has been imposed upon them from elsewhere.

The autonomous churches therefore enjoy a freedom to act that they felt lacking in the past. In so doing they run their own risks, and assume a responsibility that demonstrates their growing maturity.

The autonomous churches have found a way of giving the laity opportunities to bear with seriousness their responsibility in the work and management of the church.

It must be understood that autonomy is quite different from splitting away. Autonomy is an agreement entered upon willingly by both the parent and the younger churches. It is a covenant entered upon in a brotherly spirit, and with the willingness to help each other according to their strength. This close relationship with
the churches from which they obtained their autonomy is stressed in all their disciplines or statutes.

Theology

What about the theology of these autonomous churches? As far as I can ascertain, without exception all the churches confess their faith in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They "receive" (that is the word actually used in several of their statements) the historical witness of faith such as the ecumenical creeds, the Twenty-Five Articles of Faith, the Fifty-Two Sermons of John Wesley, and the General Rules.

How far these documents influence the life and thought of the church is another matter. But there is no doubt that the acceptance of Scripture’s authority is far more than theoretical. However wide may be the differences of interpretation of significant passages of the Bible, almost everyone will try to base his or her stand on as solid a biblical ground as can be found.

I do not know that autonomy has made any difference on the theology of the churches. Theologians always, ministers generally, and laymen sometimes are conversant with the writings of the main theologians in Europe, the United States, and the Ecumenical Circles. The latter ones have the greatest influence. Up until now I have not seen any theology that can be said to have arisen from the autonomous churches. Give us time and perhaps we will come to that point also!

What About Names?

Just a word about the names. According to British tradition the Church in the Caribbean has adopted the title of Conference, and with a somewhat geographical exaggeration has taken upon itself the ambitious name of “The Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas.” They may have been matched by Brazil which seems to have dropped in their new constitution the Brazilian reference of its name, and calls itself simply “The Methodist Church.”

In Chile, Mexico, and Peru the churches have adopted the name, “The Methodist Church of . . . . .” In Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia, the adjective “Evangelical” has been introduced before “Methodist” with the intention of making clear the positive content of their message which is the Evangel. Uruguay and Bolivia, desiring to stress the universal character of the church have substituted “in” for “of,” so their names are “The Evangelical Methodist Church in Uruguay” and “The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia.” The Argentine Church is the only one to use Argentina as an adjective. In Spanish this gives it a logical sequence from the
larger meaning to the lesser one. Literally one would have to translate it thus: The Church, Evangelical, Methodist, Argentine. "What's in a name?" Something!

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I want to bring to a close this paper about the genius of the autonomous churches in Latin America with a few remarks on several points and a quotation.

1. The Methodist Churches in Latin America have inherited from their mother churches "a strong bent towards ecumenism. As far as circumstances have allowed, they have been in the forefront of all movements towards cooperation with other Protestant denominations. Lately, however, in some countries fundamentalist and independent missions have headed a movement against the Methodist Church and have excluded it from their National Councils. Anti-ecumenism and anti-communism are their banners and they charge the Methodist with being ecumenical and their leaders communist-inclined. Another reason, never confessed but only too real in some instances, is because the Methodist Church has developed a strong national leadership. In other countries, on the contrary, Methodists are strong supporters of every effort of bringing the people of God together. Uruguay and Argentina have given to the movements issuing from the World Council of Churches a strong leadership. Both churches have joined in a Commission for Unity of the Christian Churches, together with Lutherans, Reformed, Waldensians, Disciples, Anglicans, and Presbyterians. This enterprise has as its purpose the carrying out of common tasks with the view of bringing about an organic unity in the River Platte area.

In all these countries and many of the churches, including of course the autonomous ones, a new dimension has opened in ecumenical relations, with regards to the Roman Catholic Church. The changes which have occurred in this last decade are almost miraculous. God is still alive and works wonders among His people. This is an experience into which the autonomous churches enter with joy and thankfulness.

2. In Peru and in Bolivia, where institutions loom larger in the mission of the church than is the case in some other places, the autonomous churches are making real efforts to relate these institutions more dynamically to the mission of the church in the service of the community. In Bolivia the church has entered upon concrete agreements with the Government for joint action in certain spheres of service. They have shown a new openness towards the community in which they work and of which more and more they wish to become a part.

3. In the autonomous churches one can discern a new disposition
of self-scrutiny. They are putting question marks on all their work and program trying thus to assess the validity of every aspect of their witness, no matter how traditional these aspects may have been. There is a real search to establish their own priorities and strategy in terms of the needs of their people, and of the nature of Christ's demands upon His church.

Allow me now to reflect something of their spirit, by quoting some words of the sermon pronounced by Dr. Jose Miguez Bonino at the inaugural service when the Iglesia Evangelica Metodista Argentina came into being.

“What shall we do with all this? For this is our reality, this is what we are. We cannot ignore it. [He had been speaking of our pluralism.] I believe that here the meaning of what we did yesterday inserts itself. We have not solved our problems. We have not decided who is right. We have not celebrated the victory of some over others. Simply, we have only tried to create a space where we can meet in search of our mission. I believe we have discovered that the institutions which theoretically governed us were a kind of a concrete floor that did not allow us to strike roots into this ground on which God has put us, a kind of crystal roof that did not allow us to talk with the Lord from the reality of our being. Autonomy is far from defining the existence of the Church. Nor is it even its final form of government. The Church does not give itself its own law. It is not autonomous. The Church is a servant. Jesus Christ governs her and all men rightly claim her as their servant. Autonomy for us is only a space, a meeting-place, a small area of liberty to let us become prisoners in the chains that belong to our condition of a servant church, here and now, servant of Jesus Christ and therefore of all men.

“This must be the autonomy and new structure that with it we have given ourselves. We have tried to build a workshop where we can work more efficiently, without stumbling or bothering each other, with certain clarity and order. It would be absurd that we should now dedicate ourselves to adorn, embellish, take care of and contemplate our workshop. What now is needed is that the shop should be filled with the din of work. Let the machines start and the arms move. Because it is here that the understanding of our work must be forged, the interpretation of the call that perturbs us. Here we must learn to work in such a way that our efforts become integrated and do not cancel each other out. In this new structure we must learn to serve each other rather than watch and judge each other. There are so many things to build...! We must build a way of working that acknowledges our deep differences without indifference or bitterness, and invites to the open discussion, without destroying the initiative of anyone.”