From Dependence to Autonomy: Historical Trajectories of Church Self-Sufficiency

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Abstract

This study examines the historical roots and development of ecclesial financial and institutional independence. Beginning with ancient Israel's economic and religious structures and the communal welfare practices of early Christianity, the paper argues that internal solidarity mechanisms and collective resource management were indispensable for the survival and credible witness of faith communities operating within hostile political environments. The Protestant Reformation contributed a significant theological reorientation through John Calvin's emphasis on vocation, stewardship, and decentralized church governance. In its modern form, self-sufficiency became central to Protestant missionary strategy, illustrated through three case studies: The Puritan congregational model in colonial North America, the Three-Self Missionary framework adopted by churches in South Korea, and the Jitegemea philosophy championed by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. These comparative examples demonstrate how theological convictions, cultural contexts, and historical circumstances interact to produce distinct models of autonomous ecclesial life. The article concludes that the historical record of ecclesial self-sufficiency carries significant lessons for African churches today — particularly those navigating transitions out of missionary dependence and seeking structures grounded in indigenous leadership, financial accountability, and contextually responsive ministry.

Keyword: Ecclesial Self-Sufficiency, Church Autonomy

1.0 Introduction

Throughout Christian history, the question of how churches sustain themselves materially and institutionally has commanded persistent theological attention. From the tithing systems of ancient Israel to the communal economics of the earliest Christian congregations, communities of faith have developed internally organized mechanisms for financing worship, supporting leadership, and caring for the vulnerable — all without reliance on outside benefactors. These early practices blended spiritual obligation with practical economic independence, enabling communities to maintain their integrity and fulfill their social responsibilities even under adverse conditions. Subsequent movements — including the Protestant Reformation, Puritan congregationalism, and Korean Protestant missions — further demonstrated that localized leadership, indigenous resource mobilization, and contextually adapted strategies are essential ingredients for durable ecclesiastical life. In Africa, the Jitegemea philosophy, developed by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, stands as a compelling illustration of how churches can pursue genuine independence by

cultivating local leadership, financial self-reliance, and broad community engagement. This paper argues that ecclesial self-sufficiency is not merely a pragmatic strategy but a theological imperative — one that equips churches to flourish, serve their neighbours, and pursue their mission without becoming captive to external agendas.

2.0 The Historical Development of Ecclesial Self-Sufficiency: From the Judeo-Christian Tradition to Contemporary Models

2.1. Roots in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

The concept of self-sustaining religious community finds its earliest systematic expression within ancient Israelite society. The Hebrew Scriptures describe a covenantal people whose religious institutions — including the Levitical priesthood and the Jerusalem temple — were supported not by royal patronage alone but by regular contributions from the entire community. The tithe, mandated throughout Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, functioned simultaneously as an act of worship and a mechanism for social welfare, generating resources for the marginalized: widows, orphans, and foreigners (Deuteronomy 14:28–29). This integration of economic responsibility and covenantal identity ensured that worship and social justice were not treated as separate concerns but as dimensions of a single communal vocation. The emergence of the synagogue system during and after the Babylonian exile further advanced this model, establishing decentralized communities financed through voluntary giving that could function autonomously, independent of any centralized temple authority.

2.2. The Greco-Roman Period

The early Christian church developed its characteristic forms of communal self-sufficiency within the socio-political context of the Greco-Roman world, were minority communities frequently encountered marginalization and periodic persecution. Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–35 record the Jerusalem congregation's practice of pooling resources among its members — an expression of economic solidarity that served both theological and survival functions. Scholars have noted that this communal sharing was not simply charitable generosity but a practical strategy for a group whose survival depended on internal cohesion and mutual support (e.g., Meeks, 1983, p. 109). The church's financial independence was also reinforced by its adaptation of existing Greco-Roman

household structures. Many congregations gathered in private homes, where wealthier patrons provided both physical space and material resources for worship and community care. Though this practice reflected broader cultural patterns of patronage, early Christians invested it with distinctive theological meaning, emphasizing voluntary stewardship rather than compulsory obligation. Church leaders such as Augustine and John Chrysostom consistently taught that resources entrusted to the church were meant primarily for the service of the poor and the strengthening of Christian virtue — not for the acquisition of status or influence.

The legalization of Christianity under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 CE marked a watershed moment, as the church gained access to imperial resources and state support. Yet prominent theologians refused to regard this development as a license for institutional dependency. Chrysostom, in particular, urged the faithful to support the poor directly rather than placing excessive confidence in imperial patronage, warning that such reliance could compromise the moral independence of the church. Thus, even as Christianity gained social prestige and political protection, the theological commitment to internal stewardship and sustainable ministry persisted as a defining characteristic of ecclesial identity.

2.3. Self-Sufficiency in the New Testament

The New Testament develops and expands the vision of a self-sustaining faith community, consistently framing economic independence as integral to the church's theological identity and missional integrity. The Jerusalem community's radical practice of holding possessions in common (Acts 2:44) was not primarily an economic experiment but a theological declaration: the church constituted a distinct, Spirit-led covenant community accountable to God and mutually responsible for one another's welfare. The Apostle Paul embodied this principle in a particularly striking way by refusing financial support from the congregations he was establishing — working instead as a tentmaker so as not to become a burden on those he served (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 11:7–9). This voluntary renunciation was itself a form of witness, demonstrating that the gospel message was not for sale. At the same time, Paul actively encouraged settled congregations to support their own leaders and care for their own poor (Philippians 4:15–17; 1 Timothy 5:17–18), articulating a reciprocal and sustainable model of ministry in which communities bore genuine responsibility for their own flourishing.

3.0 Theological Dimensions of Ecclesial Self-Sufficiency

3.1. In the Early Church

The New Testament emphasis on self-sufficiency was never merely practical — it carried deep theological significance rooted in the church's understanding of itself as a new covenant community called to embody divine justice, mercy, and holiness. Taking responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare of its members was understood as a concrete enactment of this identity. Pauline teaching insisted that the body of Christ must be free from external manipulation or structural dependence that could distort its witness (cf. Koenig, 1992, p. 312). The apostolic directive to care for widows, orphans, and the poor (James 1:27; Acts 6:1–6) extended and transformed the communal ethics of the Jewish tradition, grounding the church's economic practices in a theological vision of human dignity and mutual obligation. Financial independence was thus not peripheral to the early church's mission but constitutive of its identity — enabling growth, sustaining witness, and protecting its integrity against co-optation by hostile political powers.

3.2. In the Reformation Period

The Protestant Reformation introduced a new theological architecture for understanding work, wealth, and ecclesiastical governance that significantly advanced the concept of church self-sufficiency. John Calvin's theological reformulation was particularly consequential: his teaching on vocation elevated ordinary labor to a spiritual calling, while his emphasis on frugality, diligence, and stewardship gave economic self-reliance a theological warrant rooted in obedience to God rather than mere pragmatism. Calvin's insistence on disciplined congregational governance also reduced hierarchical concentration of authority, creating the structural conditions for more locally accountable and financially independent church communities. Contemporary Reformed churches continue to build on these foundations, with particular attention to tithing, stewardship education, decentralized governance, and community engagement strategies. In the case of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, which launched its institutional life in 1907 and embarked on a deliberate new phase after its centenary in 2008, Calvin's leadership model provides theological grounding for its ongoing pursuit of self-sufficiency within the framework of decentralization.

4.0 Self-Sufficiency of the Church in International Context

4.1. The United States

4.1.1. Puritan Foundations of Church Self-Sufficiency

The Puritans, a reform movement that emerged in sixteenth-century England in response to what its adherents perceived as the inadequate reformation of the Church of England, became a pivotal source of congregational self-sufficiency in the New World. Facing persecution in their homeland, the Puritans emigrated to the American colonies, where they established tightly organized religious communities in New England that operated outside the structures of state church establishment. Each congregation possessed autonomous decision-making authority, cultivating a culture of local responsibility and self-governance that proved exceptionally durable. One of the Puritans' most effective strategies for sustaining this independence was their investment in ministerial education. In 1636, they founded Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts — explicitly designed to train a learned ministry capable of maintaining doctrinal integrity and providing consistent pastoral leadership. This commitment to theologically educated local leaders ensured that Puritan congregations did not depend on clergy recruited from outside their communities.

4.1.2. Evangelical Movements and Financial Independence

The Evangelical revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries extended and democratized the principle of congregational self-sufficiency. With their emphasis on personal conversion, biblical authority, and lay participation, Evangelicals created church structures that were explicitly bottom-up in character, drawing on the energy and initiative of ordinary believers rather than relying on clerical hierarchies or denominational institutions. A decentralized model of leadership — in which lay members took active roles in preaching, teaching, and organizational management — enabled local churches to respond flexibly and rapidly to the needs of their own communities. The proliferation of voluntary mission societies during this era created a further infrastructure for coordination, training, and shared resources, allowing Evangelical networks to extend their reach both domestically and internationally without becoming financially or institutionally dependent on any single center.

4.2. South Korea: The Three-Self Principle in Practice

South Korea represents one of the most remarkable cases of rapid church growth combined with deliberate structural self-sufficiency in modern Christian history. The foundational strategy shaping this development was introduced by John L. Nevius, an American Presbyterian missionary who visited Korea in 1890 and shared a mission approach he had previously refined in China. The Nevius method, centered on the principles of self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation, took deep root in Korean Protestantism and provided the organizational philosophy around which an increasingly indigenous church was built. Nevius's conviction — that mission objectives must prioritize churches capable of governing themselves, financing their own operations, and expanding through their own initiative — helped inoculate Korean Protestantism against long-term dependency on foreign resources and personnel.

A particularly noteworthy dimension of Korean church growth was the strategic integration of women into leadership roles. At Yoido Full Gospel Church, for example, Pastor Yonggi Cho's decision to appoint women as small group leaders ran directly counter to prevailing Korean cultural expectations. Yet this decision, grounded in a careful reading of scriptural precedent, proved to be a decisive catalyst for the church's extraordinary growth. Women-led cell groups multiplied rapidly, becoming the organizational backbone of one of the world's largest congregations. The lesson for the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda is instructive: when Pastor Cho's culturally counterintuitive decision to trust women with leadership was implemented, it generated transformational results. The Rwandan church can similarly strengthen itself from within by identifying and deploying the gifts of all its members — both men and women — thereby expanding ministry through community-based groups while reducing institutional reliance on external support.

Korean churches also demonstrated the indissoluble link between financial self-reliance and missional vitality: the same churches that invested most deliberately in internal sustainability also became most active in global mission deployment, sending missionaries to multiple continents. The Korean experience thus affirms that the journey from dependency toward self-sufficiency is not merely a theoretical aspiration for the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda but a practically achievable and theologically necessary goal.

5.0 The "*Jitegemea*" Philosophy of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa

5.1. The Origin and Meaning of "*Jitegemea*"

In 1971, a philosophical and practical reorientation of African Christianity found its most influential early expression in the work of Rev. John Gachango Gatũ (1925–2017), the first African to serve as General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (P.C.E.A.) and subsequently its Moderator. Gatũ's pivotal contribution was his call for a moratorium — a deliberate pause — on the flow of Western missionaries and financial resources to African churches. This proposal, first advanced in a celebrated address at the Department of Overseas Missions of the Presbyterian Church USA in Princeton on February 17, 1971, and reiterated in Milwaukee later the same year, ignited a worldwide debate about the future of cross-cultural missions and the autonomy of the global South church.

The philosophy Gatũ championed became institutionalized as "*Jitegemea*" — a Swahili concept derived from the root Egemea (to lean against) and Tegemea (to rely upon), combined with the prefix Ji- to signal the reflexive inversion of dependence: to stand on one's own feet. As P.C.E.A scholar Gatũ explained, the word encapsulates a vision of ecclesial maturity grounded not in the repudiation of relationship with global partners but in the development of genuine reciprocity. "*Jitegemea*" was not isolation; it was the assertion of African agency and dignity as the precondition for authentic partnership.

5.2. Gatũ's Teaching on Church Leadership and Justice

Gatũ's advocacy for self-reliance was inseparable from his broader vision of justice and prophetic witness. He consistently argued that African churches could not credibly speak truth to power, defend the poor, or fulfill their prophetic mandate while they remained structurally dependent on the goodwill of external donors. His insistence that the church must never surrender its prophetic voice — that it must be willing to stand for truth even at significant personal cost — reflected a theological conviction that institutional dependency was itself a form of spiritual compromise. Gatũ also championed the full inclusion of women in church leadership and theological education, publicly supporting women's ordination within the P.C.E.A at a time when both cultural tradition and ecclesial convention resisted such change. His reasoning was direct: justice within the church could not be claimed while half its members were excluded from positions of authority.

5.3. Gatũ's Teaching on Financial and Institutional Self-Sufficiency

At the core of Gatũ's vision was the conviction that continued African dependence on foreign missionaries and donor funding represented a lingering expression of colonial paternalism, perpetuating the very inferiority and stagnation that independence was meant to overcome. A genuinely self-sufficient church, in his view, would be free to define its own theological agenda, train its own ministers, and engage with the particular spiritual and social realities of its own community without external mediation or interference. He observed that sustained reliance on outside assistance cultivated a debilitating psychology of inadequacy — a sense that African churches lacked the capacity to sustain themselves. Gatũ linked ecclesial self-sufficiency directly to the Reformed principle of stewardship, regarding financial autonomy as simultaneously a biblical imperative and an African cultural mandate. His practical contribution to this vision included leading programs to train local elders and pastors and encouraging congregations to fund their own building and development projects.

5.4. "*Jitegemea*" as an African Model of Self-Sufficiency

The P.C.E.A's adoption of "*Jitegemea*" as its institutional philosophy produced tangible and measurable results. Within two decades of formally embracing the philosophy in 1973, the church had dramatically reduced its dependence on foreign funding and was financing the majority of its budget from local contributions. The motto was incorporated into the church's organizational logo as a permanent reminder of the calling to institutional self-determination. In practical terms, this orientation catalyzed local initiatives across Kenya: churches in Nyeri and Kirinyaga counties established private schools and strengthened P.C.E.A-sponsored institutions entirely through local means. The church also developed weaving and handcraft centers, girls' secretarial training programs, HIV/AIDS outreach, and refugee support initiatives — each grounded in the Jitegemea commitment to addressing African challenges with African resources.

The "*Jitegemea*" philosophy was further institutionalized through the establishment of the Presbyterian Foundation, registered in September 1973, which was granted authority to manage, develop, and invest in church property for the long-term financial benefit of the entire institution. The Foundation enabled the P.C.E.A to finance education, healthcare, and mission work on a sustainable basis without resorting to external appeals. Alongside this, the P.C.E.A built a portfolio

of educational institutions — including Alliance High School, P.C.E.A Tumutumu Girls High School, and eventually the P.C.E.A University of East Africa — that generated revenue for church programs while serving their local communities. Healthcare through P.C.E.A's hospitals at Kikuyu, Tumutumu, and Chogoria, real estate development through the P.C.E.A Housing Scheme, SACCO financial services for members, bookshops and publishing ventures, and agricultural projects collectively reinforced the church's capacity to stand on its own feet.

Institutional Africanization accompanied this financial transformation: the appointment of the first African treasurer in 1968, localization of clergy appointments, and the revision of the Practice and Procedure Manual in 1970 all reflected the P.C.E.A's determination to reshape not only its economics but its governance structures in accordance with "*Jitegemea*" principles. The combined effect of the "*Jitegemea*" philosophy and the Harambee ("Let us put together") spirit embedded in Kenyan civic culture created a powerful engine for congregational participation, tithing, stewardship, and church expansion. Christians across the P.C.E.A came to understand that the church's work belonged to them — and responded with their time, talents, and resources accordingly.

5.5. Key Themes and Lasting Legacy of "*Jitegemea*"

Gatũ's foundational insight was that dependency on foreign support, however well-intentioned, ultimately impeded rather than advanced the church's maturation. Local ownership of ministry — spiritual, financial, and institutional — was the precondition for genuine growth. He expressed this conviction memorably: "We cannot build the church in Africa on alms given by overseas churches." The movement he inspired called African Christians to recognize and deploy the resources — human, financial, cultural, and spiritual — that God had already provided within the continent, rather than framing their poverty as an argument for continued external assistance.

The "*Jitegemea*" model has extended its influence well beyond Kenya, serving as a case study in liberation from what scholars have called the "Aid Dependence Syndrome" that afflicts many churches in the developing world. Its legacy for the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda is particularly instructive: The Rwandan church's own decentralization agenda, launched after its 2007 centenary, draws on comparable convictions about local empowerment, parish accountability, and indigenous leadership. The journey from institutional dependence to self-sufficiency is, as the P.C.E.A's

experience demonstrates, demanding but achievable — and ultimately productive of a church with greater resilience, integrity, and missional effectiveness.

6.0 Conclusion

The historical record surveyed in this article confirms that ecclesial self-sufficiency is neither a recent preoccupation nor a purely pragmatic concern: it constitutes a persistent theological theme rooted in Scripture, shaped by the Reformation, and practically demonstrated across multiple cultural and historical contexts. From the tithe-sustained worship of ancient Israel and the communal economics of the early Jerusalem church, through Calvin's theology of vocation and stewardship, to the Puritan congregational experiments in New England, the Three-Self model of Korean Protestantism, and the "*Jitegemea*" philosophy of East Africa — each tradition has affirmed that genuine ecclesial life requires financial independence, local leadership, and active community ownership. Dependence on external resources, while sometimes necessary in the short term, ultimately constrains the church's capacity for authentic witness, prophetic courage, and self-determined mission. For African churches navigating the aftermath of the missionary era, these precedents offer not merely inspiration but practical models: indigenous leadership development, disciplined stewardship, gender-inclusive participation, and community-based economic initiatives are proven paths toward the kind of self-sufficiency that enables the church to serve its people, fulfill its calling, and contribute to a global Christianity that is as locally rooted as it is globally interconnected.

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