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Presbyterian Ministerial Preparation in Brazil

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A SOCIOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

This article is a section of Dr Ronald Frase's doctoral dissertation "A Sociological Analysis of the Development of Brazilian Protestantism: A Study of Social change" (Princeton Theological Seminary 1975 411–425). The Presbyterian Church of Brazil has now adopted extension training methods in several states.

The article is reprinted to encourage other churches to study their own history and consider the possibility of adopting alternative approaches to theological education and ministry.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

While all the sending bodies were committed to establishing educational institutions in Brazil none were more committed than the Presbyterians. Their Reformed tradition of a highly educated ministry and presbyterial church government which was well suited to Europe and the settled east coast of the United States was often a liability on the Brazilian frontier. This statement does not deny its many accomplishments but rather is designed to focus attention upon the fact that structures which are viable for one cultural milieu will not function as effectively when exported to another culture without undergoing significant modification.

The Presbyterian Church's commitment to rigid institutional structures has hampered its acculturation to the demands of Brazilian society. That the sending body was not aware of this fact, which in retrospect is self-evident, is reflected in the report of the Board of Education in the *Minutes of the General Assembly* for the year 1847.[1] After declaring that, "The basis of all operations of the Board of Education is, that a pious and well qualified ministry is the great instrumentality appointed by the Head of the Church for the conversion of the world,"[2] it proceeded to outline the urgent need of more ministers and missionaries to meet the great need of proclaiming the Gospel to every creature. There were at the time 500 Presbyterian churches in the United States without pastors and then there was "the almost confounding element of the increase of our population … It has been computed in popular language, that the wave of the population moves p. 115 westward at the rate of eighteen miles a year."[3] The report explains that while the need at home and abroad was expanding the number of candidates for the ministry (which was "the great instrumentality for the conversion of the world") was diminishing. The report ends by offering a solution to the crisis in the form of a plea for more money to assist seminarians to get an education because "our standards make high literary attainments an

[1] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian in the U.S.A.*, vol. XI (1847), pp. 535–37.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 535.

[3] *Ibid.*

indispensable qualification for the sacred office."[4] In 1847 the Presbyterian Church stood in the best position to profit from the expanding western frontier by virtue of its financial resources, evangelists, institutions and trained leadership, yet history shows that the Baptists and Methodists, benefiting from a far more flexible institutional structure, were more successful. They recognized that highly trained ministers are not the only "instrumentality appointed by the Head of the Church for the conversion of the World."

THE REFORMED LEGACY IN BRAZIL

Unfortunately for the Presbyterians their loyalty to their Reformed legacy prevented them from perceiving that the Brazilian frontier demanded a different response and thus history repeated itself. The pattern of preparing men with "high literary attainments" as pastors was replicated, necessitating the establishment of a seminary. This goal was realized to a remarkable degree but at considerable cost. Gilberto Freyre attests to the seminary's success with the following observation concerning some of its graduates:

> *It is interesting that some of the best philologists of the period such as Eduardo Carlos Pereira, Otoniel Mota, and Jeronimo Gueiros were Protestants. Protestants apparently wishing to prove through their cultivation of the pure mother tongue that they were good Brazilians and good patriots in spite of their rejection of the maternal and traditional religion.*[5]

Such erudition was the result of a combination of native ability and good preparation. The students faced a course of training *p. 116* equal in rigor to what was demanded in North American seminaries.[6]

At this juncture we want to examine some of the ways in which the Reformed legacy of a highly trained ministry proved to be an obstacle to the spontaneous expansion of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. First, remembering that the vast majority of Brazilians at that time were illiterate and that the churches suffered from lack of pastoral care one must question the wisdom of such intensive education patterned on the classical model which removed capable leadership from active ministry for several years. The many communities visited by J.M. da Conceicao on his peripatetic ministry opened up unparalleled opportunities which, in some instances, were never developed for lack of pastoral care.

Second, the sophisticated and prolonged seminary education tended to alienate aspiring pastors from the simple rustic life of their people. It socialized them into a world of tastes, values, interests and attitudes which was not shared by their congregation and which hindered effective communication with the masses of common people.[7] Some missionary leaders saw this as both desirable and inevitable because, as one of them

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 537.

[5] Gilberto Freyre, *Ordem e progresso* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora José Olympio, (959), vol. I, p. 1 xi.

[6] Paul E. Pierson, *A Young Church in Search of Maturity: Presbyterianism in Brazil from 1910–1958* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1947), p. 251 notes that the curriculum for 1910 included the following: Psychology, Ethics, History of Philosophy, Greek, Hebrew, Hermeneutics, Textual Criticism, Introduction to the Old Testament, Introduction to the New Testament, Archeology, Sacred Geography, Exegesis of Old and New Testament including Psalms, the Gospels, and Hebrews; two years of Systematic Theology, Bible History, Church History, History of Doctrine, Homiletics, Pastoral Theology and Ecclesiology.

[7] For a discussion of the middle class mentality of the ministry see Emile G. Leonard, *O protestantismo brasileiro* (Sao Paulo: ASTE, 1961), pp. 232–233.

explained, "the ignorant classes cannot easily understand the full gospel or study it. If, therefore, pastors and missionaries use great care in receiving members the resulting church is predominantly intellectual."[8] The Baptists, and later the Pentecostals, discovered that the ignorant classes, which accounted for approximately 85 per cent of the population,[9] were fully capable of understanding the Gospel and that the most effective pastors were those who lived among their people and whose preparation consisted of on-the-job training.

Third, the above option was not available within the Presbyterian system of church government which reserved the p. 117 right of administering the sacraments to ordained seminary graduates. The Reformed legacy was an obstacle to a rapidly growing church whose demand for pastors could never be met by such a stringent policy of supply. Unlike the Baptists whose educational requirements did not stand in the way of ordaining proven lay people with minimal education when the occasion demanded, many Presbyterian congregations were denied the status of Church recognition for years.[10] McIntire states that "… the local church was considered to be founded as soon as two or more people became members. The actual organization of the church, however, was often delayed for many years."[11] Mário Neves, the redoubtable organizer of many churches in the states of Espirito Santo and Minas, recalls that because of the great shortage of pastors many seekers (*interessados*) became tired of waiting to be received into a Presbyterian Church and consequently joined other denominations.[12]

The writer became the first pastor of the church, Valerio Silva, in Salvador, Bahia, in 1963. This congregation had been organized approximately forty years earlier. Two obstacles had stood in its way of acquiring church status. According to Presbyterian ecclesiology a session was composed of a minimum of two elders. Just as the civil government made literacy a requirement for voting so the Presbyterian Church made it a requirement for the office of elder. Valério Silva could only boast one. This was resolved when a very dedicated elder from the larger and more fashionable downtown church, Major Jeter, volunteered to move his membership to Valério Silva. The second obstacle was economic. Valério Silva was located in an extremely impoverished section of the city and could not begin to contribute to the support of the middle class life style of a pastor. This was resolved by assigning the writer, whose salary was paid by the mission, to be the church's pastor. Neither of these factors—education or poverty—are barriers to the ecclesiology of Baptist or Pentecostal groups.

Fourth, the expense of a seminary training, generally subsidized by the sponsoring presbytery, was a luxury beyond the means of many presbyteries. In 1928 the Presbytery of the North was p. 118 unable to send its only new candidate to seminary while the Presbytery of Pernambuco was unable to send three of its four candidates because funds were lacking.[13]

Fifth, the Presbyterian form of government calls for the collaboration of both teaching eiders (ordained pastors) and ruling elders (ordained laymen) in its various

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[8] W.A. Waddell, cited by Pierson, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Leonard, op. cit.*, p. 81.

[11] Robert McIntire, *Portrait of Half a Century, 1859–1910* (Cuernavaca: CIDOC, 1969), p. 8/3.

[12] Mario Neves, Meio século (Sao Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1955), pp. 28–29.

[13] Pierson, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

judicatories—sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assembly. These juricatories can only function effectively by meeting at frequent intervals for planning, consultation, and supervision. Brazil's sparsely populated interior, inadequate transportation system, and the great distances between communities made such a system impractical. Instead of a monthly meeting of presbytery, as is common in the U.S., many Brazilian presbyteries have only one stated meeting a year. The Northern Synod, which in 1914 stretched from the Amazon to Rio de Janerio, was often unable to hold its biennial meeting for lack of a quorum. Both economic and geographical barriers militated against synodical organization and there were those who advocated that they be abolished, but Alvaro Reis reasoned that the Brazilian Church should retain them because the U.S. Church had synods.[14]

This commitment to Presbyterian order meant that many congregations were left to their own devices with a rare visit from a pastor. The writer was impressed on more than one occasion to visit congregations which maintained a very active life directed by the initiative of their lay leaders. One such congregation on the island of Itaparica, located a few miles from the city of Salvador, could recall going three years without a pastoral visit and still it maintained weekly worship services, Sunday School, and a youth program but it could not celebrate the sacraments or receive new members except on those rare occasions when the pastor visited. This neglect, Pierson notes, cultivated a spirit of congregationalism among the Presbyterians in the northern part of Brazil.[15]

REASSESSMENT

In reassessing the Presbyterians' attempt to replicate the Reformed tradition in Brazil it is important to recognize the vastly different historical circumstances which provided the context for the Reformers' activity in sixteenth century Europe and the missionaries P. 119 in nineteenth century Brazil. There are two significant aspects in which these contexts differed. First, the Europe of the sixteenth century was a relatively stable, mature, Christian society whereas nineteenth century Brazil represented a young, dynamic, pagan nation (in the eyes of the missionary) with an expanding frontier experiencing dramatic social change. Secondly, the problem faced by the Reformers was one of conservation whereas the missionaries were confronted by the problem of penetration. The reformers lived in a Christian society and their preoccupation was understandably one of order—how to preserve the *corpus christianum* against the unrestrained antinomian tendencies of the Enthusiasts which threatened to destroy the Church. They met this threat by elevating the role of the ordained ministry as the instrument to maintain order and not, as the 1847 General Assembly Minutes stated, as the "great instrumentality appointed by the Head of the Church for the conversion of the world." Living in a Christian society threatened by destruction the principle of order took precedent over the concern for mission. The missionaries, by contrast, found themselves confronted by a totally different problem—how to penetrate a secular and pagan world with the evangelical message. They were caught in the dubious situation of developing an offensive strategy with church structures designed for defensive purposes—preserving order. Had the Reformers been confronted by the problem of penetrating a secular society instead of conserving the threatened *corpus christianum* it is safe to assume that they would have developed a far more flexible church structure.

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

The Presbyterian Reformed legacy's preoccupation with order saddled it with a relatively inflexible church structure which failed to adapt to the exigencies of a frontier missionary opportunity. The Baptists, as on the U.S. frontier, once again took advantage of their more flexible structure and although they initiated their work more than two decades after the arrival of Simonton they overtook the Presbyterian Church of Brazil by 1931 and the total Presbyterian communion by 1940.[16] when one attempts to account for the more rapid growth of the Baptists it is evident that its principle of local autonomy was far more viable given the demographic character of the country and a society which historically had resisted centralized control. Leonard suggests p. 120 that its less demanding ministerial preparation, its simpler message, and its identification with the lower classes were also assets for a church expanding among the popular masses of Brazil.[17] Another factor which was effectively exploited by the Baptists was the lay ministry. Although there is abundant evidence of lay activity within the Presbyterian Church it was never fully exploited due to an incipient clericism fostered by an ecclesiology which placed effective power in the hands of the clergy at the expense of the laity.

Baptist flexibility permitted laymen to meet the requirements for ordination without enduring the long, arduous, and costly training which presented itself as an insuperable barrier to Presbyterians without the necessary educational background. Lay evangelists were employed by the missions and a few even worked for the Presbyterian Church. Some of these were extremely effective and desired ordination and while their services as pastors were urgently needed they were denied ordination because of their lack of seminary education. Such evangelists, were they in the employ of the Baptists, would have been ordained and it was precisely for this reason that the Baptist attracted many pastors trained by other denominations.[18] Explaining the dilemma of the Presbyterian lay evangelist Pierson says:

> *Even though he did the work of a pastor he could not administer the sacraments or preside ever the local session. This placed him in a position which was not only theologically indefensible, but psychologically untenable.*[19]

There were efforts to mobilize the laity and to provide alternatives to formal seminary education as a prerequisite for ordination within the Presbyterian Church but these efforts were defeated by the proponents of presbyterian order. In 1877 a *Training School* for ministerial candidates was established in Sao Paulo and a young enterprising missionary, a recent graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, Rev. John Howells, joined the faculty. He quickly perceived the problems created when students from the interior were exposed to the conditions of urban life. Such an experience often produced such a strong disaffection with rural life that they were unable to return and serve in the presbyteries p. 121 which had sponsored them. In order to surmount this problem he struck on the idea of establishing a similar school at Brotas in conjunction with an existing self-supporting school where students paid for their tuition by working two hours a day

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[16] Erasmo Braga and Kenneth G. Grubb, *The Republic of Brazil: A Survey of the Religious Situation* (London Dominion Press, 1932), p. 97.

[17] Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[19] Pierson, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

on the school farm.[20] It was his intent to provide religious training for teachers from that rural area during their four months vacation period, thereby equipping them to be lay leaders of rural congregations. His strategy is described in an 1878 Board of Foreign Missions report as follows:

> *... it is the intention of Rev. Howells to have another class at Brotas for four months in the year, where those who are teaching school can attend during vacation, that they may be fitted to become Bible-readers and evangelists. It is expected that while teaching the children during the week, they will, on Sabbath, minister in spiritual things to their parents, making simple but practical explanations of Scriptures and exhortations. These Bible-readers, coming from among the people, and having been educated without losing their former habits of life, and therefore living just exactly as the people, will not only seem nearer to them and better able to sympathize with them, but will also require much less for their support, and consequently in a short time will be entirely independent of the mission.*[21]

Such a program was indeed far-sighted for its time, approximating the pattern of present-day Pentecostalism. The school carried on for nine years when it was forced to close because of failure of its farm crops.[22]

There were attempts to discover more economical, less time-consuming, and more relevant alternative routes to ordination than formal education. The area of Eastern Minas and Espirito Santo was hard-pressed to find pastors to supply the rapidly multiplying rural congregations of the prosperous coffee frontier during the second and third decades of this century. This most dynamic center of Presbyterianism was unable to recruit a sufficient number of pastors who had the prescribed seminary training. Impatient with the time-consuming seminary preparation which siphoned off needed leadershp and gave candidates a p. 122 theological education which, in their judgement, was excessively sophisticated for their rural congregations, they resolved to ordain some candidates who were field-tested but had not completed the formal seminary program. Mário Neves, one of the leading pastors of the area, reports a strong clerical reaction in the church councils where the seminary of Jequitibá was referred to as the "factory of crippled ministers."[23]

Another effort to expedite the preparation of laymen was an attempt made by the short-lived Union Seminary. This seminary was the result of interdenominational effort stimulated by the Panama Congress. It was established in Rio in 1919 and introduced some innovative programs. Many of its courses were offered at night to accommodate business and professional people who were interested in studying for the ministry. Courses were offered on more than one level and it was attended by some students who were motivated by their interest in theology and were not necessarily seeking ordination. Once more the spirit of clericism reared its head and protested that such a program would lower standards considered essential for the ordained ministry.[24]

Boanerges, in his biography of Conceicao, makes the observation that the death of the ex-priest marked the end of a period when the initiative of the Church was in the hands of nationals. During Conceicao's brief ministry the missionaries were hard-pressed to follow up the many opportunities opened by his wide-ranging itineration. With his death

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[20] Charles Malvern Brown, "A History of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. in Brazil" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1947), p. 154.

[21] Robert L. McIntire, *op. cit., p. 7/64*.

[22] Charles Brown, *op. cit. p. 154*.

[23] Mario Neves, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30.

[24] Pierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–174.

they assumed control of the direction of the work and imposed the North American pattern upon Brazil.[25] Prior to Conceicao's conversion the missionaries had made only modest headway using the North American pattern of gathering a crowd to hear a sermon. Blackford succeeded in gathering an audience but there was little response to the message, even in Brotas, while Schneider was meeting frustration in his ministry to the German colonos in nearby Rio Claro. Boanerges traces the relative ineffectiveness of this approach to the fact that unlike American and English audiences the Brazilians did not possess a familiarity with biblical literature.[26] Conceicao's remarkably successful efforts of evangelism forced the missionaries p. 123 to temporarily abandon their strategy. Boanerges describes this change in strategy as follows:

> *The hour of destiny was approaching in which the young national Church would create its own methods of penetration and propagation of the Gospels which was the arduous and exhaustive struggle along the roads, from ranch to ranch: of personal and direct contact with the person being evangelized; prayers on bended knees on the earthen floors of tiny rooms and principally the tremendous power of a man possessed by the Holy Spirit and prepared to live his life in preaching family by family, house by house, individual by individual, and soul by soul.*[27]

Conceicao has been criticized because of his lack of organization and structure. It must be remembered that a church can die just as easily from stifling overorganization as underorganization and it is academic to discuss which is worse. It is correctly pointed out that he neither baptized nor organized churches. His ministry consisted in preaching and treating peoples' physical infirmities. He had a distinct distaste for routine and organization which Leonard suggests is part of his rejection of Roman Catholicism. He had left a hierarchical church which was superorganized and he had no appetite to create another.[28] Waddell acknowledges that Conceicao's method spared the Brazilian Church from the experience of overorganization which had befallen Presbyterian mission effort in so many other places:

> *Conceicao and Chamberlain covered so much country that it was utterly impossible to establish regular services with Sunday sermons, a Thursday evening meeting, and the other paraphernalia of North American religious expression in each place where they had awakened interest.*[29]

Pierson argues that Conceicao's ministry would have been more productive had he remained in Brotas consolidating the work there and itinerated less. This is a moot question, after all this was strategy which the missionaries had been following and with less than gratifying success. It can be just as persuasively argued that the strength of his ministry was his itineration which opened up communities permitting others to enter and nurture a congregation. *p. 124* It was also his itineration which made a significant impact on the first four seminarians who at various times accompanied him on his travels when they were not studying in Rio. Not only were they inspired by Conceicao but they provided

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[25] Ribeiro Boanerges, *O padre Protestante* (Sao Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1950), p. 192.

[26] *Ibid*,pp. 144–145.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

[29] W.A. Waddell, "History of the Brazil Mission," in *Modern Missions in Chile and Brazil*, by Reginald Wheeler, *et. al.* (Philadelphia, 1926), p. 344.

much-needed manpower to the small Presbyterian force which alternated between three and four couples. This combination of formal theological training and practical field work was a much more appropriate preparation for a rapidly growing frontier church than the North American model which was destined to dominate the preparation of future Brazilian pastors. The concern for order prevailed over the concern for mission. The missionaries failed to see that a structure which had been reasonably effective in one culture at one point in time had to be significantly altered when exported to another culture. In retrospect it is clear that the Reformed concept of a highly educated ministry prepared by formal seminary training acted as a constraint upon the development of the Presbyterian Church. When confronted by conditions propitious for rapid growth it was unable to maximize its opportunity for lack of structural flexibility. Other denominations, such as the Baptists and later the Pentecostals, possessing greater structural flexibility were able to respond in a manner appropriate to the given historical conditions and experienced spectacular growth. It is not being suggested here that either the Baptists' or Pentecostals' traditions are models to be copied *en toto* and that the Reformed tradition be scrapped. Both these traditions have their own problems which are endemic to their structural organization. It is being suggested, however, that the Reformed concept of ministerial preparation is less than adequate for those historical moments which offer the opportunity of rapid growth as witnessed by both the North American frontier and the Brazilian experience.

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Teaching Christ as Liberator in Extension Education

Chris Sugden

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AN EXPERIMENT IN WRITING A TEE COURSE ON CHRISTOLOGY

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The Editor of ERT would also welcome articles end comments in response to this disturbing model.
(Editor)