

SONS
OF THE PROPHETS

*Leaders in Protestantism from
Princeton Seminary*

EDITED BY HUGH T. KERR



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VI. ASHBEL GREEN SIMONTON (1833-1867)

*A Calvinist in Brazil**

BY M. RICHARD SHAULL

WHEN Ashbel Green Simonton arrived in Rio de Janeiro on August 12, 1859, after having graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, he entered upon a work which was to make him a central figure in the establishment of Protestantism and the Reformed Faith in Brazil. He succeeded where a group of French Calvinists had failed three hundred years earlier. His life, seen in the perspective of the century that has passed since his arrival in Brazil, provides us with an outstanding example of the stature and achievements of an unusual group of Princetonians who were pioneers in the missionary enterprise on three continents. As we examine his work in this same perspective, we will also be obliged to consider the limitations of his training and some of the implications of this for theological education in our time.

Simonton's work was set in an unusual context, for Rio de Janeiro had been the site of one of the few missions outside of Europe in which the Reformers of the sixteenth century

* The most important sources for our knowledge of Simonton's life and work are: *Journal of the Reverend Ashbel Green Simonton, Missionary to Brazil* (unpublished manuscript); personal and official letters to the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, New York; the *Historic Record of Mission Work in Brazil from July 25, 1860*, by the Rev. A. L. Blackford. These, together with other source materials from the period, are available in the library of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church, New York, and in the Presbyterian museum in Campinas, Brazil. The major facts about Simonton's life are presented briefly in Robert L. McIntire's *Portrait of Half a Century: Fifty Years of Presbyterianism in Brazil (1859-1910)*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959. See also Julio Andrade Ferreira, *História da Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil*, Editôra Presbiteriana, São Paulo, 1959.

were directly involved. In 1555 Admiral Villegagnon had enlisted the support of Admiral Coligny and of John Calvin for an expedition to Brazil, the purpose of which was to drive out the Portuguese, establish Calvinism, and provide a place of refuge for persecuted Protestants from Europe. The group arrived and settled on a small island in what is now known as Guanabara Bay. Three years later a second expedition was sent, which included fourteen Huguenots, two of them ministers, selected by Calvin and the Church of Geneva.

The colony soon ran into troubled times. It did not have a solid economic base and was torn by internal dissension. The climax came when Villegagnon decided to return to the Roman Catholicism he had earlier renounced. The Calvinists were expelled and were to be returned to Europe. When their boat was in danger of sinking in the harbor, however, five of them decided to return to the colony, where they soon became the first Protestant martyrs in Latin America.¹ In 1560 the Portuguese defeated the French colonists, and this Calvinistic mission completely disappeared.²

Early in the seventeenth century, the Dutch invaded North Brazil and established themselves in Bahia, which they controlled from 1635 until they were driven out in 1654. From the very first, they took pastors and missionaries with them. Eventually two presbyteries and a synod were formed with forty pastors and eight missionaries working among the Indians. There was, however, no significant penetration among the Brazilian people, and when the Dutch colonists were expelled Calvinism disappeared with them.

These two missionary ventures occurred at a time when Portugal maintained its colony in complete isolation from the rest of the world. Moreover, the religious situation was dominated by the Jesuits, who had begun work in Brazil in 1549. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, sig-

¹ Three were killed by Villegagnon; one was allowed to live because he was the only tailor in the colony; the fifth escaped only to be executed by the Inquisition a few years later.

² One of the Calvinists who took part in this venture and returned to France, Jean de Lery, later wrote a history of it: *Histoire d'un Voyage fait en la terre du Brasil*, Paris, 1880.

nificant changes had taken place. A royal edict of 1808 that opened the ports of Brazil to all friendly nations was followed in 1822 by the Emperor's declaration of Brazil's independence. With these events a new world suddenly opened up before the Brazilian people. As the élite began to read French books, liberal ideas spread, and a new mentality developed, while the French and American revolutions aroused new political hopes. The ideals which began to inspire the younger generation seemed closely akin to thoughts and events in Protestant countries; this created a certain predisposition in favor of Protestantism and what it stood for.

Brazilian Catholicism was unprepared to deal with this new mentality. As Professor Leonard has shown, the religious situation in Brazil at that time was very similar to that of western Europe before the Reformation.³ The decline of the work of the Jesuits, culminating in their expulsion from Brazil in 1759, left the field wide open to a type of primitive Catholicism that had become a social religion so adapted to the culture that it had lost its spiritual vitality. The number of priests was very small; their training, poor; their level of spirituality, low. Superstition abounded. What deep Christian concern existed was often Jansenistic in character, reflecting, as Leonard has noted, warm interest in the Bible, austere piety, and a strong tendency toward independence from Rome. Those who were most influenced by the new intellectual climate would have nothing to do with this religion; at the same time, many felt a deep religious longing which sought satisfaction in Masonry, esoteric cults, and in Protestantism as it appeared through the instrumentality of the North American missionary.

In this new wave of Protestant penetration, Simonton was not the first to arrive. The Anglicans had begun work early in the century. The Methodists started a mission in 1836

³ See Émile-G. Leonard, "O Protestantismo Brasileiro. Estudo de eclesiologia e de história social," Cap. I, *Revista de História*, São Paulo, January-March, 1951, No. 5, pp. 117ff. This work, which appeared in successive numbers of this review, is the only serious historical study of the development of Brazilian Protestantism which has been published to date.

which was closed down soon afterward. Representatives of the Bible Societies traveled widely, distributing the Scriptures. In 1855 Robert Kalley, a Scotch physician who had begun missionary work on the Island of Madeira, fled to Brazil with some of his people to escape persecution. Three years later he organized a Church and carried on a very discreet type of evangelistic work which early won support in certain circles at the Court. It was left for Simonton, however, to begin the first organized effort of missionary penetration which was to sink roots in Brazilian soil and spread throughout the country.

II

Some of the early missionaries to Brazil were sons of the American frontier, prepared by this experience for pioneer work under difficult circumstances. Ashbel Green Simonton was not of this company. Son of a physician in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, and named after a Presbyterian minister who had served as President of the College of New Jersey and also of the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary, Simonton was reared in the solid middle-class culture of that time, in a home in which Presbyterian faith and tradition were strong. He was sent early to the College of New Jersey, from which he graduated in 1852. After eighteen months traveling through the South and teaching in Starkville Academy in Mississippi, he returned home and began the study of law. Soon thereafter his spiritual pilgrimage began that led him to abandon law, study for the ministry, and commit himself to the foreign missionary enterprise.

Simonton had been consecrated to the ministry by his parents when still a small child. He had attended church and had taken part in various revival meetings across the years but felt no deep religious convictions or experience. At the same time, his *Journal* reveals a growing spiritual dissatisfaction and a feeling that, as he writes on his twenty-second birthday, his life has "so little purpose." About that time there was a new wave of revivalism in Harrisburg. After attending several meetings, Simonton came to a decision. For a long time, as

he states in his *Journal*, he had been aware not only “that the affairs of eternity are of much greater moment than the affairs of time . . . but that even in this life, to be a Christian is the highest wisdom.”⁴ As up to that time he had had no experience “in the heart,” he had not acted on this conviction. Now, although such an emotional experience was still lacking, he decided to accept as valid the promises of the Gospel and live them out. On the day that he reported having joined the Church, he wrote thus in his *Journal*: “The more I analyzed and looked into my feelings and exercises of mind the more I have been perplexed and involved in doubt, and it is only when I turn from myself to the plain, clear and full promises of the Gospel that I find any stable footing. I have therefore after earnest prayer to God for direction decided to give over these efforts to obtain comfort or clearer evidence of my acceptance by Christ by looking into my own frames and feelings, and putting my trust in the plain word of the Scriptures, to endeavour in the promised assistance of the Holy Spirit to do my duty.”⁵ It was on this foundation that he based his whole future course, and it was both the motivation of his work and the source of deep spiritual unrest, as his *Journal* clearly shows.

This decision was followed almost immediately by his resolution to study for the ministry and to thus give expression to a desire that had been growing in him for several years. For him the ministry offered the opportunity to be decisively involved in the events taking place in his time. As he wrote while meditating on the question during his time in Starkville, “There is . . . a great day coming—an era in the world’s history—when vast results are to be brought about and great changes wrought, and they will be honored who are the instruments in this work.”⁶ More central for him was the conviction that, as a minister, he would be required to trust only

⁴ *Journal of the Rev. Ashbel Green Simonton, Missionary to Brazil* (1855). Original manuscript in the library of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; copy in Historical Museum of the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas, Brazil.

⁵ *Journal*, May 3, 1855.

⁶ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1854.

in God, serve him alone, and live only by his succor. This was the path by which he could be fully a servant of Jesus Christ, in total self-giving, "with joy and zeal." From the moment when, upon entering Princeton Seminary, he worked out a program for discipline and growth in Christian faith and life until the end of his short career as a missionary in Brazil, this purpose and passion shaped his life.

We know very little about Simonton's years at Princeton Seminary. His *Journal* has few entries during this period and practically no references to his studies. He does inform us, however, of the factors that led him to become a foreign missionary. His thoughts were first directed toward the mission field by a sermon of Charles Hodge. What this decision meant for him is stated clearly and concisely in a paragraph in which he comments on this sermon:

"I have listened today to a very interesting sermon from Dr. Hodge on the duty of the church as a teacher. He spoke of the absolute necessity of instructing the heathen before success in the spread of the Gospel could be expected, and showed that any hopes of their conversion based upon the extraordinary agency of the Holy Spirit directly communicating truth were unscriptural. This sermon has had the effect of leading me to think seriously of the foreign mission field. The little success apparently attending missionary operations has tended to dissuade me from thinking of going. But I see I have been wrong. That the heathen are to be converted to God is clearly revealed in the Scriptures and I am convinced that day is coming rapidly. Those who are now laboring are preparing the way and God will not suffer their labor to be in vain. He who lays the foundation will receive an equal reward with those who perfect the building. I have never before seriously considered the question as to my duty to go abroad, always taking for granted that my sphere of labor would be somewhere in our great and rapidly growing country. It is, however, I feel convinced, a matter to be taken into deep consideration whether since most prefer to remain it is not my duty to go."⁷

⁷ *Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1855.

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After this it was only a question of time until he applied to the Board of Foreign Missions in New York. His application was accepted, and he was appointed to Brazil. After his graduation from Princeton Seminary in 1859, he was ordained by Carlyle Presbytery and on June 18 sailed for his new field of labor.

III

Simonton arrived in Brazil with a message which was to speak to the Brazilian soul at a time when many were dominated by superstition, fear, and uncertainty of salvation; at a time when others were searching for a new and vital spiritual reality relevant to the hopes and concerns of their time. Protestant preaching brought the message of justification by faith, a new type of religious experience, and a new form of Christian life.⁸ José Manoel da Conceição, the priest who was converted by the missionaries in the first years of their work, gave expression to what this meant for him. Speaking of the ecstatic experience which was his at the moment of his reception into the Protestant community, he wrote: "Do you find this mysterious? Mysterious it shall remain while you have not emptied even unto the dregs the cup of purification, a drink which shall set your teeth on edge. All this bitterness, however, will be followed by an inexplicable sweetness. You shall slumber. You shall faint of love for God; but you shall awaken in triumph most glorious, even that one which is most difficult to reach: triumph over yourselves. You shall feel yourselves converted to God, identified with Christ. Only then shall you know what it is to live and breathe the pure atmosphere of the Christian life."⁹

As the bearer of this message, Simonton had a very clear

⁸ For evidence of the centrality of these themes in Simonton's preaching, see *Sermões Escolhidos*, by G. L. Shearer, New York, 1869.

⁹ *Profissão de fé evangélica*, cited by Robert L. McIntire, "Portrait of Half a Century," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959, p. 106. I am also indebted to Dr. McIntire for much of the information about Simonton's life and work used in this chapter, and for his kindness in reading the chapter and offering valuable suggestions.

understanding of the task before him, which is expressed in the title of a paper he read to the presbytery a short time before his death: "The Proper Means for Planting the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in Brazil." He was not content merely to proclaim the Gospel as widely as possible, nor to set up a "mission" which would do the job of evangelism. His supreme purpose was to lay the foundations for a *Church* that would be the instrument of evangelistic penetration throughout Brazil.

Simonton gave himself to this task with a rare intensity of devotion. He would have only eight years before being stricken down by yellow fever at the age of thirty-four. Of that time, one year was spent learning the language, another on furlough in the United States. As a pioneer on a new frontier, he could look for help neither to the study nor the experience of others. Living in a tropical climate to which he was not accustomed and laboring in an alien culture, he began his work entirely alone and during the last years of his life bore the sorrow caused by the death of his wife one year after their marriage. Yet in this short time and in these circumstances, Ashbel Green Simonton accomplished what he set out to do, for he laid the foundation and set the pattern for the growth of one of the strongest and most creative among what is today called the "Younger Churches."

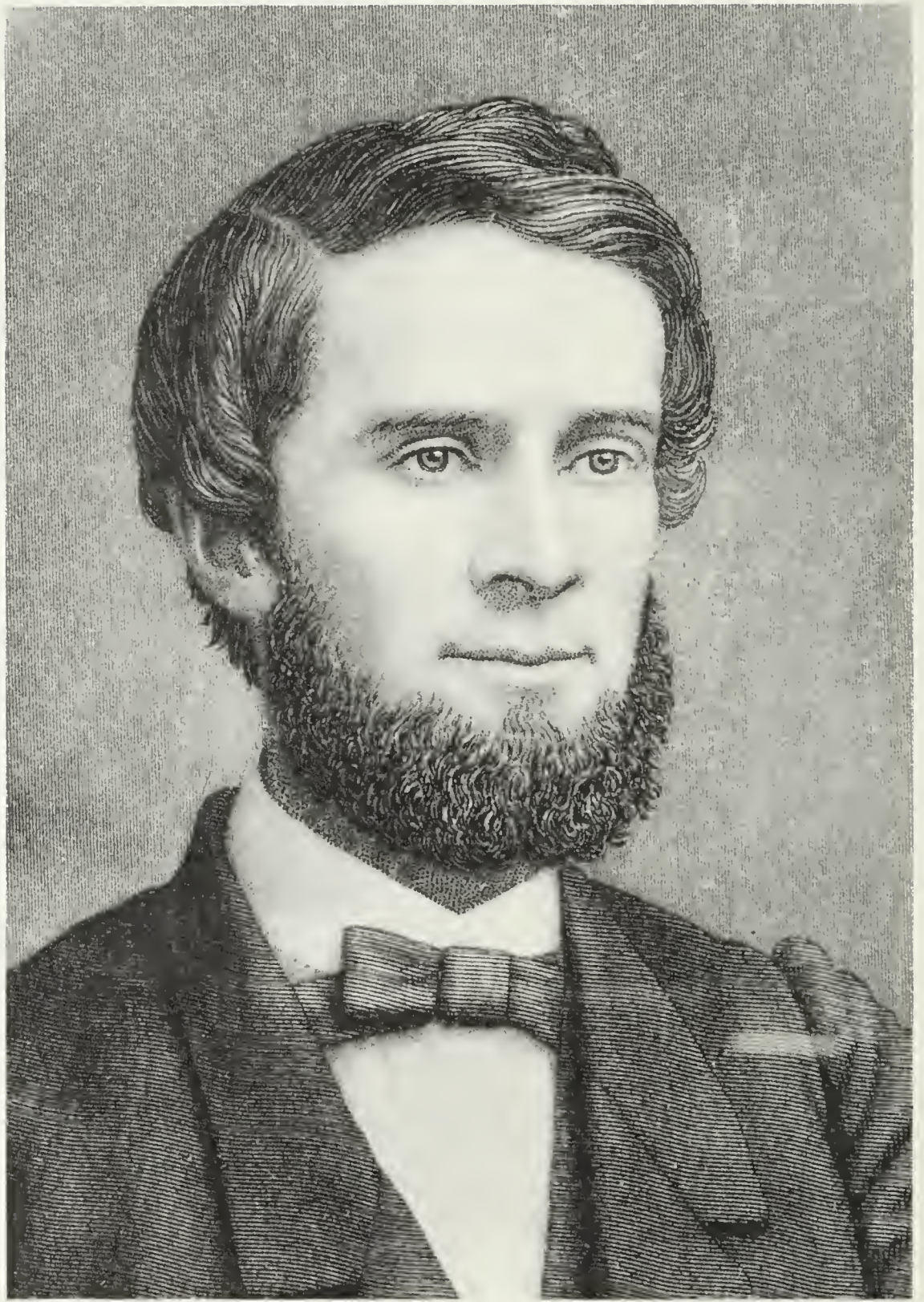
From the very start he was confronted by a problem that has been one of the most crucial in the whole Protestant missionary enterprise and to which missionaries by and large have given little attention: that of the *base* of the Christian community within the society in which it is taking form. We have no reason to believe that Simonton was originally disturbed about this. When he arrived in Rio, Robert Kalley was already attempting to establish just such a base at the Imperial Court. Simonton rightly concluded that the time was ripe for the widest possible diffusion of the Gospel by the distribution of the Scriptures and other literature, itineration, preaching, and personal evangelism. It was his hope that as this was done some would respond and be gathered into the

Christian community which would then provide the base for evangelism.

Things did not work out that easily. After a year and a half Simonton reported his discouragement. A very small nucleus had been formed in Rio, but it showed few signs of growth. It was composed of a few North Americans and other foreigners and a number of other isolated individuals; it had not sunk its roots into a natural community in which it could be firmly established and grow. Simonton gradually became aware of the seriousness of this problem. He began a weekly service in the home of one of the first families to be converted, the Eshers, and urged other members in the congregation to offer their homes for such meetings. In his own words, each such family nucleus could become a "new center of Christian influence, from which grace flows." There is no indication that he was very successful in this attempt.

In the face of this problem, A. L. Blackford, Simonton's brother-in-law and first missionary colleague, soon concluded that they should transfer the headquarters of the mission to São Paulo. Eventually Blackford went there, but the small nucleus that took form was very similar to that in Rio. As early as 1860 Simonton made a long trip through the interior of the province of São Paulo, where he discovered a large number of German Protestant colonists. He saw here the possibility of a new base and convinced the board to send an American of German descent to begin work with them. This attempt also failed.

The answer appeared quite unexpectedly at a very different point. José Manoel da Conceição had spent nearly twenty years as a priest in small villages in the interior of the State of São Paulo. As the bishop did not trust this man, who was even then known as the "Padre Protestante," he did not allow him to stay more than a year or two in any one village. His last field of service before becoming a Protestant had been a new agricultural community called Brotas. To this he returned as an itinerant evangelist and soon several of the leading families in the area had been won to the Protestant cause. When the missionaries arrived, they found that a dynamic



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Christian community had already taken form. Simonton wrote in his *Journal*, "I found more of heart and religious earnestness in this community and conceived of greater hopes of the rapid propagation of the Gospel in Brazil."¹⁰

To what extent Simonton and his colleagues recognized the sociological significance of the events in Brotas, we do not know. The important thing is that the base for a vital and spontaneously expanding Church in Brazil had been found. Two years later the congregation had 61 members; by 1874 the number had risen to 140. It included entire families in the town and on the *fazendas*, some of the leading people in the area as well as ex-slaves. From this group the Gospel began to spread to other areas as far as 200 kilometers away, as these families moved or entered into contact with relatives and friends elsewhere. Conceição was constantly on the move, engaged in an intensive evangelistic effort with all those whom he met. The missionaries moved more slowly, trying to establish firmly a few congregations that could then be the center of evangelistic expansion. In communities such as these the foundations of a strong and growing Church were laid.

IV

Simonton focused his efforts on the development of those elements that he considered essential in the life of such a missionary community, and, by the time of his death, the first major steps had already been taken in each of these areas. His primary concern was with the cultivation of *strong congregational life*. In his writings there are few references to worship, but he gives constant attention to the sacraments. Similarly, he stresses the centrality of doctrine and discipline. One of the three textbooks he used in his first Sunday School class was a catechism of Christian doctrine, and in his report to the presbytery on his work during the year 1867, he mentions that on one Sunday morning each month he had been teaching the Shorter Catechism rather than preaching a sermon. This same report reveals the importance he gave to stewardship educa-

¹⁰ *Journal*, May 5, 1865.

tion, for the congregation not only contributed to its own support but gave almost as much to the poor. He was also aware of the importance of lay participation both in the work of evangelism and in worship and the total life of the congregation. In his last report to the presbytery, he mentioned a new venture in this regard by which he had modified the Sunday morning service, which now began with "a more familiar preface, the members of the Church taking a more active part in the prayers and meditations which are the objective of this meeting. I attach much importance to this preface as a means of contributing to greater development of the members of the Church, thus providing them with an opportunity for expression and work in the service of the Lord." Simonton was also convinced that primary schools for the children of believers would make a major contribution to the building up of this community. He listed this as one of the most important means of establishing the Kingdom of Christ in Brazil and started such a school in conjunction with the Church in Rio.

A second concern was the development of adequate ecclesiastical structures. Here Simonton simply imported the Presbyterian system as it functioned in the United States, as we can see from this brief report by his colleague Blackford concerning the organization of the first Presbytery, December 1865:

"Rev. A. G. Simonton of the Presbytery of Carlisle, Rev. F. J. C. Schneider of the Presbytery of Ohio, and myself of the Presbytery of Washington, the members of the Brazil Mission being met in our parlor, Mr. Simonton moved that we constitute ourselves into a Presbytery to be called the Presbytery of Rio de Janeiro, to be connected with the Synod of Baltimore. I was elected Moderator, Mr. Simonton, Stated Clerk, and Mr. Schneider, temporary clerk.

"O Sr. José Manoel da Conceição was received as a candidate for the ministry, examined on experimental religion and his knowledge and acceptance of the doctrines and form of

government of our church; which being satisfactory the examination on science, languages, etc. were dispensed with."¹¹

This uncritical importation of ecclesiastical structures would raise, in later decades, serious problems that were not evident at the time. In one sense, however, the presbytery represented a significant new development, for it included from the beginning an outstanding Brazilian pastor, who was to be followed soon by other strong national leaders.

Simonton gave special attention to the formation, in the Calvinistic tradition, of a strong national ministry for the leadership of the new Church. With discernment not common among missionaries of his time, he sensed that the work of the foreign missionary would have to be temporary and of secondary importance in the development of a missionary Church. He wrote: "If these workers come from foreign countries, they are obliged to learn a new language and become accustomed to the ways of a new land. This fact in itself makes one believe that the greatest part of the workers have to be of this country."

Several young candidates soon appeared. They began to accompany Conceição on his missionary travels, but were soon taken to Rio, where Simonton founded the first Presbyterian seminary in May 1867. From what we know of the program of study, it was quite academic and followed closely that of seminaries in the United States. After a few years the seminary had to be closed because of a shortage of teachers, but an emphasis had been placed on theological education that the Presbyterian Church of Brazil soon took up and has continued to this day.

One other initiative of Simonton's deserves mention: the publication of the *Imprensa Evangélica*, the newspaper that he began in November 1864, and which continued as the official organ of the Church for twenty-eight years. This paper, with the tremendous burden it placed upon its director, was

¹¹ *Journal Record of Mission Work in the City of São Paulo, Brazil*, from October 9th, 1863 to December 25th, 1865. Quoted by McIntire, "Portrait of Half a Century," p. 114.

an expression of his double concern: to provide the strongest possible nourishment for the new evangelical community and at the same time to diffuse the faith as widely as possible. In it we find articles on a wide variety of subjects, witnessing incidentally to Simonton's extraordinary skill in the use of the Portuguese language.

In the midst of all these activities what most stands out is Simonton the man, the incarnation of a new form of Christian life and commitment for Brazil. In him Christian faith expressed itself in a totally dedicated person who was at the same time warmly human, who rejoiced in meaningful friendships and relations, and who was interested in all aspects of the human situation. He gave expression to a type of personal piety that reflected constant communion with Jesus Christ, deep humility, and the recognition of personal limitations and failures. The last entry in his *Journal* expresses this well: "In the retrospect of my own life during the year now closed, I feel self-condemned. I can point to some labor performed as best I could but have I progressed heavenward? Here it is that I feel myself lacking. I cannot get beyond the prayer of the publican: God be merciful to me a sinner! Shall it be always thus with me? The very press and activity of my outer life has hindered my communion with Him to whom this service is paid. How often have my devotions been formal and hurried, or disturbed by thoughts of plans for the day! And sins often confessed and bewailed have asserted their power over me. Oh! for a baptism of fire to consume my dross; oh! for a heart wholly Christ's."¹²

It was this man who was the bulwark of a new mission, the center of strength in the midst of tensions and crises, and a person whom a leader of the Presbyterian Church a century later could consider "one of the saints of modern Christianity."¹³

¹² *Journal*, December 31, 1866.

¹³ Boanerges Ribeiro, *O Padre Protestante*, Casa Editora Presbiteriana, São Paulo, 1950, p. 115.

V

To relate Simonton's life and work to the situation of the Reformed faith in Brazil today is a difficult and treacherous task for anyone deeply involved in that situation. Looking back from this vantage point, the first thing which impresses us is that Simonton succeeded in so short a time to do what he set out to do. Even more impressive is that this man conceived of his task in terms which only recently have come to the fore in Protestant missiology: the development of the Church as a missionary community with a solid foundation and adequate forms for its life and growth and in which the missionary would occupy a secondary place from the start. And, as we have seen above, he and his colleagues—missionary and national—succeeded where missions failed in many parts of the world, in finding a solid base in the community structures of the society to which they went. In these respects we can say that Simonton stood out among his contemporaries and was far ahead of many of those who came after him in both Church and mission in Brazil.

We have now arrived at the end of an era in both the Church and the mission for which Simonton laid the foundation. Once again Calvin's mission to Brazil is threatened, not this time with extinction, but with the possibility of becoming irrelevant if it fails to respond to the challenges of the new world in which it suddenly finds itself. We are being forced to the conclusion that our faithfulness to Simonton and to the cause for which he gave his life now demands that we go about our mission in a very different way and change, perhaps radically, the patterns and structures of the Christian community which came into being as a result of his efforts.

What makes this a crucial problem for missiology and for theological education is the discovery that the issues we face have their present form and intensity because they have been serious issues for Church and mission for many decades. But we have either not been aware of them or have been unprepared to meet them. In fact, they may have existed as far back as the first decade of Presbyterian work in Brazil. Simon-

ton and his colleagues had to face these problems, and the decisions he and his successors made helped to determine the way the problems are raised today. It may be useful to look at several which are particularly evident and which must be seen in this historical perspective.

(1) *Indigenization: Protestantism and the Brazilian Culture and Temperament.* With the recent upsurge of nationalistic sentiment and the struggle of the Brazilian people to find their self-identity and to develop authentic forms of cultural life, we are now able to see to what extent Protestantism has been content with imported forms instead of trying to find more indigenous expressions of the Gospel. One of the leading Presbyterian pastors in Brazil today, the Rev. Boanerges Ribeiro, has shown a growing concern for this problem. In his excellent biography of José Manoel da Conceição, he expressed it this way: "With rare exceptions, the Protestant preaching has always found friends among the nationals who become converted; but the nascent congregations enter the mould of the churches from which the missionaries have come to us."¹⁴

This problem arose in the very first years of Presbyterian work in Brazil. There are two references in Simonton's *Journal* that may indicate that he was disturbed by it. Soon after his arrival in Rio de Janeiro, he records this conversation: "Having been often asked to take wine, I explained today to the Americans with whom I was dining my reasons for declining. Dr. L. thought, here where wine was not used to intoxicate, my reasons and example would not be understood."¹⁵ The fact that Simonton took the trouble to record this conversation is a hint that he gave it serious consideration. More important, however, is his observation about the use of *Pilgrim's Progress*. On April 28, 1860, he tells of starting his first Sunday School class and remarks that the three textbooks he is using are "the Bible, a catechism of sacred history, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*." After the second class, he makes this observation: "Amalia and Marroquinas think it hard to under-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵ *Journal*, Sept. 12, 1859.

stand John Bunyan. They have no substratum for his lessons, it is something different from all they have heard, seen or felt, so that they cannot get right hold of it.”¹⁶

If he had lived a few years longer, it is quite probable that in dialogue with Conceição and in constant contact with his work Simonton’s keen and open mind would have grasped the implications of the fact which he vaguely sensed. Boanerges Ribeiro has this to say about Conceição’s vision of the Reformation in Brazil: “It seems that he did not desire the establishment of a Protestant Church transplanted from another race, another culture, different tradition or temperament, but a profound movement of Reformation in the sentiments and religious experience of the people, allied to Biblical instruction, which would make possible the creation of a pure and evangelical Brazilian Christianity, but which would be rooted in popular traditions and habits.”¹⁷ He then proceeds to quote a page from Conceição which, although referring directly to the Enlightenment, may have had a much wider application for him:

“If we unwisely wish to communicate to men, without any preparation, truths which are utterly incomprehensible to them, using these truths in this way falsely and harmfully, we will not thus promote enlightenment. To enlighten is to lead the thinking man to meditate, in order to make him courageous and capable of being able to discover for himself the truth which we communicate to him. . . . There are many uneducated men who are children in many respects, and who should be indoctrinated with great circumspection. For to destroy certain prejudices and useful customs, practices which are many times a substitute for the truth itself, is in no sense enlightenment; but rather inhuman levity and excessive cruelty. Respect then the customs and ancient practices of the people which, in the absence of more profound understanding, are capable of guiding them and keeping them on the right path. Oh my God! I will respect the religion of the ignorant—

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, May 1, 1860.

¹⁷ *O Padre Protestante*, p. 206.

the faith of those who have had few opportunities of knowing Thee and worshipping Thee in a worthy way. I will never allow myself to be dominated by vanity and presumption in such a way that I might shatter the pious faith of others by inconsiderate words and actions."¹⁸

This concern seems to have disappeared from the scene along with Simonton and Conceição, and another generation of missionaries took full direction of the orientation of the leadership of the Church. As a result, the national Church tended to accept these imported patterns without serious questioning. There was naturally much unconscious adaptation of the Protestant message and way of life to the Brazilian situation. Yet what was lacking for many decades was the acute awareness of this issue that we find in Conceição, which could have maintained a constant openness, among missionaries and national leaders, to the demands for indigenization. If this had happened, it might have been possible to avoid the development of such a rationalistic Calvinism among a strongly emotional people, or of a rigid Puritanism, which tended to stifle rather than liberate and transform the vitality of the Brazilian soul. It might have been possible to raise earlier the questions relating to a Brazilian theology, the use of the rich musical tradition in Brazil for Protestant hymns, and the adaptation of Church structures and patterns of congregational life to Brazilian reality, all of which would have made much less acute the situation in which we find ourselves today.

(2) *Ecclesiastical Structures*. The question of ecclesiastical structures is a serious one for Protestantism throughout the world today. In those Younger Churches where the alien patterns imported by the missionaries have not been transformed in creative encounter with the local situation, the problem has now become especially acute.

In the first years of Presbyterian work in Brazil, the foundations were laid for what might have become a creative struggle with this issue. In his encounter with Roman Catholicism,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

Simonton was forced to make a serious theological study of the question and came to see very clearly the role of the Holy Spirit in giving form to the Church. In a pamphlet, "The Vicar of Christ," he affirmed that Christ indicated to his disciples "who was to take his place in the teaching and direction of the work of His visible church," namely, the Holy Spirit who not only accompanies the disciples and convicts them of sin but also "completes the revelation of the divine will and assists in the organization of the Christian Church and the propagation of the same until its final triumph throughout the world." The presence and work of the Spirit in the Church has tremendous consequences: " 'Where two or three are met together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' The seat of Him who acts for the Savior on earth is established then in all the meetings of those who are true believers in his name. This seat is not established exclusively in any one particular place or city to which it is necessary to go in order to receive the benefits of his personal presence and work. Nor is it necessary to have a general council in order to guarantee the assistance of this Vicar in His Church and receive His teaching so that He may direct it in the doctrines of salvation and in the discipline of the house of God."¹⁹

Conceição, after years of experience within the rigid structures of the Roman Church, was especially sensitive at this point and was searching for a form of Christian community that would possess the depth and richness of life which the Spirit gives to the Body of Christ. When Simonton and his colleagues, however, went about setting up an ecclesiastical structure, they fell back, as was almost inevitable, on the patterns they knew at home. In the first decades, especially in the rich community life of the congregation in the rural areas, no serious problems arose. But as the ecclesiastical institution developed and as the theological insight of Simonton and the witness of Conceição were forgotten, a pattern developed in which a rather rigid and sterile organization came to the fore, and in which the absorption in administrative activities threat-

¹⁹ "O Vigário de Cristo," Presbyterian Board of Publications, Philadelphia, n.d.

ened the development of the missionary community that represented, for Simonton, the supreme goal of his efforts.

The crucial problem arose in the definition of the role of the ministry in the Church. Here too Simonton's doctrine of the Spirit opened the way for a breakthrough. In his study of the sacraments is a paragraph which has a very modern ring about it: "All of the twelfth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians treats of the structure of the Church and of the position which each one of its members should occupy, establishing this luminous principle, that the diversity of ministries was determined by the operation of the Holy Spirit. No one should aspire to any position without having received the precise spiritual gifts for the worthy exercise of it. The action of the Church was limited to the confirmation of these gifts."²⁰ The fact that this observation is followed by his conclusion that the one important ministry in the Church is that of the preacher of the Word should not detract from this insight and the possibilities it could have offered for the development of a new Church.

Likewise, Conceição dedicated himself to a most extraordinary expression of an indigenous ministry. With his rich educational training, culture, and sense of scholarship, he chose to begin an itinerant ministry that combined total identification with the people, communication of the Gospel in amazing depth, and a fantastic rapidity of evangelistic penetration in the interior of the country. Soon three or four young men received the call to the ministry and began to accompany him. If only this had been developed, it might have given form to a radically new type of ministry and to the spontaneous expansion of the Reformation in Brazil.

But Simonton and his colleagues took these men out of this situation of involvement and put them in a seminary organized on traditional lines. After a few years the seminary was closed, but by that time the traditional, imported pattern was firmly established. As a result, today both minister and

²⁰ *Os Sacramentos*, Presbyterian Board of Publications, Philadelphia, n.d., Chap. vii.

congregation often find themselves in a frustrating situation. The diverse gifts of the Spirit tend to be concentrated in one man who can easily understand his role, in a culture shaped by Roman Catholicism, as that of possessing and using authority to run the Church. The layman has restricted opportunities for using his gifts, while the majority of the Churches are unable to support a fulltime pastor. The ministry is considered very much like the liberal, middleclass professions, but without offering the advantages which these professions usually offer and tending to make the minister someone detached from the realities of a dynamic society rather than a militant participant in the center of its life.

(3) *Gospel, Church, and World*. Here we confront our most urgent question. The evangelical community knows modern man's interest in life in this world and the threats of disintegration that modern society brings into his personal life; it also feels the consequences of the breakdown of traditional culture and society under the impact of foreign forces and is caught up in the growing concern about social injustice. The result of all this is a deep sense of disorientation and anxiety, which can only be met to the degree that the Christian faith provides a foundation for the reintegration of human life in community and the redefinition of Christian responsibility through a new vision of God's redemptive activity in the world.

The early Presbyterian missionaries often revealed a strange mixture of Calvinistic concern for the world with pietistic ignoring of it, which we see demonstrated even in Simonton. His *Journal* reveals a keen interest in politics, the question of slavery, human need, and other major issues of his time. The Civil War distressed him greatly and led him not only to pray constantly for his country but also to see more clearly the relation of his faith to the struggles of his people: "I have seen and do see as I never did before, that God is the Savior of nations as well as of individuals and that he can bring the haughty low."²¹

²¹ *Journal*, December 31, 1861.

His preaching did not develop this insight. Its message centers almost exclusively on individual piety. Even in his sermon on "Love" and a poem on the same theme, he never gets around to the implications of this for man's life in community.²² His sensitivity to the American political scene was not matched by an equal awareness of what God was doing in Brazil nor of the relationship of the Gospel to social questions. As a result, one of the major dimensions of Calvin's Reformation in Geneva was absent from Simonton's plan for the Reformation in Brazil.²³

Conceição conceived of the Gospel in a dynamic relationship to his country and its life and had great dreams of its influence on the total life of the nation.²⁴ He concluded his reply to the sentence of excommunication in these words: "The well being of my country, the moralization of society, whose felicity only the Gospel can guarantee, and the eternal salvation of men, are the objectives which I have in view. I am in the hands of God and at the service of all whom I may be able to serve in the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Neither Conceição nor those who came after him had been provided with a theology capable of dealing with this. The result was almost complete separation between the Gospel and evangelical piety, on the one hand, and the major issues of life in the world, on the other. The Presbyterian Churches produced an unusual number of men who achieved positions of distinction in diverse areas of national life; but by and large they and their brethren in the faith did not succeed in presenting to their fellow Brazilians an understanding of the

²² Published in *Sermões Escolhidos*.

²³ See the first part of André Biéler, *La Pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, Georg & Cie., Geneva, 1959.

²⁴ See especially a paper which he presented before the presbytery, entitled: "Porque o Brasil Carece (da Pregação) do Evangelho?" Also the address which he made in Rio de Janeiro on the occasion of Lincoln's death in which he speaks of the power of free men in the building of a free society, and which would seem to indicate that Conceição and Simonton had discussed at length the influence of the Gospel in the development of a free society: "As Exequias de Abrahão Lincoln Presidente dos Estados-Unidos de América com um Esboço biographico do mesmo offerecido ao Povo Brasileiro por seu Patricio José Manoel da Conceição," Rio de Janeiro: Eduardo & Henrique Laemmert, 1956.

Gospel which was related creatively to the major intellectual and social issues before them. In the midst of the tremendous events now occurring in Brazil, the contributions our Calvinistic heritage might make remain largely unknown, while a growing number of laymen become convinced that what happens in the Church is quite irrelevant to the important issues of human existence and are oriented more by the ideologies which are dominant in the center of these struggles than by their Christian faith.

For Simonton the Gospel provided the basis for the total reconstruction of human life. In a sermon on "Eternal Life," he declared: "Eternal life consists in the greatest possible development of the virtues implanted and cultivated in the soul of the believer by the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit: to have the understanding illuminated and strengthened in order that it may contemplate God and know his perfections, to have the heart purified of its idols and consecrated to the worship of God, and to live in the constant practice and experience of the virtues enumerated by St. Paul; that is—to live in the enjoyment of God."²⁵ Because Calvinism in Brazil was not prepared to understand that this new man must take shape within the structures of the world, this pattern for the Christian life soon degenerated into legalism, and has now become for many a burden rather than an Evangel.

Underlying all of these issues is the question of what happened to the Calvinistic theology, for the failure to meet these problems is the failure of theology to be vital and relevant. We have already mentioned how Simonton makes practically no references to the decisive theological issues being debated in Princeton Seminary or in the Christian world; at the same time, he used the catechism as one of his first textbooks and urged the translation of A. A. Hodge's *Outlines of Theology* as the first book needed for the Brazilian seminary. This translation appeared in 1895, and since then very little basic theological literature has been written or translated in Brazil. At present there are many signs of a renewal of vitality as both laymen and ministers are revealing deep concern for theo-

²⁵ "A Vida Eterna," Presbyterian Board of Publications, Philadelphia, n.d.

logical studies. The issues we now face, however, possess the gravity they now have, in part at least, because this did not happen earlier.

VI

In this attempt to discover the historical origins and continuity of the problems now facing the Presbyterian Church in Brazil, we have no intention of diminishing the importance of Simonton's accomplishments. We have no right to judge his work from a perspective of historical development that he could not possibly have shared. His limitations are the limitations of the Calvinism that was dominant at the time. What is most disturbing in this whole picture is the fact that those who came after him did not become aware of these problems much sooner, that, in the decades immediately after Simonton, many of his successors went backward rather than forward in their awareness of these issues, and that our own generation has been so slow in discovering the frontiers of God's action in Church and world. We cannot sit in judgment on Simonton and his successors; we also dare not close our eyes to the serious questions God is raising for us at this time if we hope to be faithful to Simonton's objective.

The crucial question is the failure of Calvinism to be true to one of the fundamental principles of its own heritage: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. For each generation, Christian obedience means keeping up with and responding creatively to what God is doing in the world and in the Church on those frontiers where renewal must take place. In terms of the mission of the Church, the question raised is that of the place of missiology in theological education as the study of what God demands of his people in their witness, at every moment and in every concrete situation, in a dynamic world. Especially in our day, the bringing to fruition of the work of the great missionary pioneers such as Simonton will depend largely upon the type of study and involvement in mission that will apply this Calvinistic principle and thus provide the foundation for the type of radical renewal which is now demanded in the Christian world mission.