**Christianity in Brazil[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*The Atlas of World Christianity* estimates that the number of Pentecostal Christians across South America grew some 500 percent between 1960 and 1980. Though that growth has since slowed, it has changed forever the religious landscape of that continent. So, the *Atlas* reports, South America today has “the strongest Christian community in the world.”

It’s well worth our time in this Global Christianity class, then, to understand the nature of that “strongest Christian community” and where it came from. To do that, we’ll be looking at just one country in South America this morning: Brazil. I’ve picked Brazil for a few different reasons: first, because it is South America’s largest. Also because it has such an interesting story to tell. But also because our church increasingly has ties to churches in Brazil. Our pastors are often asked to go there to speak, we’ve had quite a few pastoral interns from Brazil, and we get so many Brazilians interested in our three-times-per-year weekender conferences that every year we translate one of them fully into Portuguese.

Just a little bit of background: as I mentioned, Brazil is the largest country in South America, over 200 million strong. That makes it the fifth largest country in the world, just smaller than Indonesia and the United States. For the last few decades, the capital of Brazil has been Brasilia, in the central West of the country. Its two major cities are Rio de Janeiro, on the Southern coast, and São Paulo, just over the mountains, a few hours’ drive southwest of Rio.

**Early Origins**

Brazil has had a Christian history ever since its discovery by a Portuguese naval commander, Pedro Álvares Cabral, in 1500, who staked his country’s claim on the coastland he saw as he sailed the Southern Atlantic. And the first official act of the settlers who arrived at the place they called “The Island of the Holy Cross” was to celebrate the Mass. For the next 400 years, this land—first as part of Portugal, then the independent Empire of Brazil, then a Republic—would support the Roman Catholic Church. And for centuries “this tight relationship discouraged any significant Protestant initiatives.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Of course, that doesn’t mean there was no Protestant presence in Brazil during those years. In 1555, the French arrived in Rio de Janeiro to establish a small French colony, led by a Roman Catholic admiral who was nonetheless sympathetic to the new Protestant cause in France. On that ship were many Huguenots—French Calvinists—who were soon joined by two pastors sent by John Calvin himself. They named the fort they built after Gaspard de Coligny, the famous aristocrat-turned-Huguenot. The colony quickly became a refuge for more Protestant Huguenots but twelve years after its founding, it was destroyed by the Portuguese. Its residents either returned to Europe or were killed. In 1558, only twelve hours before being hanged, a number of these Huguenots managed to write the first Protestant writing in all of the Americas, the Guanabara Confession of Faith.

But, while Protestantism’s influence in Brazil was minimal for several hundred years, we shouldn’t conclude that the country immediately became Roman Catholic. Nor should we think that as Roman Catholicism slowly sunk in, it was identical to the Roman Catholicism of Europe. As one historian put it, “Brazil is considered the largest Roman Catholic country in the world, but ‘Brazil is a Spiritist country, not a Catholic country.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) In the words of one Presbyterian pastor, “If you ask people, they say they are Catholic. But if you really start to analyze, they are Spiritists.” That is, they practice some combination of African religions that came over with captured slaves and the native religions indigenous to South America, mixed with Roman Catholicism.

Despite its mixed nature, however, Roman Catholicism really did have a lock on religious life in Brazil for several hundred years.

**Empire & Republic**

All this began to change as Brazil entered the 19th century. In 1808, the Portuguese royal court escaped to Brazil, under pressure from the advancing armies of Napoleon Bonaparte. As the royals became better acquainted with their sometimes-neglected New World territories, it seems they began to see things from more of a Brazilian perspective. So when the court returned to Portugal, the king’s son, Pedro I, declared Brazil’s independence from Portugal, founding the Empire of Brazil in 1822.

Significantly for our purposes, the Empire’s constitution, adopted in 1824, pursued liberality in a number of dimensions, not least of which was to adopt freedom of religion for the new country. Though this liberality was limited: other faiths were allowed to express their beliefs both privately and publicly, but non-Catholic places of worship could not have the appearance of a church.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 1841, Pedro’s son Pedro II was crowned emperor, and in 1849 he banned the slave trade in Brazil, after which European immigrant wage earners—many of them Protestant—began to replace slaves as laborers. It’s with this political change and the founding of the Empire that the story of Protestantism really begins. We’ll start with the Anglicans who were the first on the scene.

*Anglicans*

In 1819 the Church of St. George and St. John the Baptist began to be built in Rio de Janeiro, considered the first Protestant church building in Brazil. (Yes: this was five years before the new Constitution that granted religious freedom. Things don’t always move in a straight line.) Anglican growth was slow, however, for while *foreigners* were free to worship, Brazilians were not allowed to attend meetings.

Beginning in 1836, however, Anglican chaplains began assisting English sailors in Rio de Janeiro and evangelistic work slowly spread beyond the English. In 1890, the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil was officially founded and soon there were evangelistic works started in a number of different cities throughout Rio Grande do Sul, the Southernmost state of Brazil, just above modern-day Uruguay that lies down the coast from Rio de Janeiro. In the 19th century, it was the Anglicans who did the most to expand Protestantism in Brazil.

*Lutherans*

Like the Anglicans, the Lutherans got their start through trade, not missionary activity. The first German settlers immigrated to Brazil as farmers and small businessmen in 1824, arriving in Nova Friburgo near Rio de Janeiro. The pastor of their first church was the first Lutheran minister in Brazil, Friedrich Osvald Sauerbronn. But other settlers also brought pastors with them and soon a Lutheran Synod was established in the country. These settlers did not come to evangelize but to work, though, and so Lutheran services were performed exclusively in German. And that pattern held for generations.

The Lutherans—along with the early Anglicans—reflect a broad pattern in Christian history of missed opportunities. That is, Christians move to a gospel-less place, often as merchants, but largely keep their Christianity to themselves. Be it Chinese Christians in Malaysia, British Christians in the United Arab Emirates, or elsewhere, there are real opportunities for the gospel that come from the immigration of Christians. But Christians need to seize those opportunities. Just putting Christians in a new place doesn’t always result in cross-cultural gospel work.

At least for the Lutherans, that story began to change in 1900 when American Lutherans began their missionary activities in the same state of Rio Grande do Sul where the Anglicans had established a presence. These missionaries extended their ministry to Brazilians and the Lutheran Church grew rapidly, comprising 226,687 baptized members by the 1930s. Like in the United States, the Lutheran Church in Brazil is represented by two major bodies. There is the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil—similar to our ELCA. And the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, linked to the more theologically conservative Missouri Synod.

*Congregationalists*

One Protestant group we often forget about here in the States, because of their dwindling numbers, are the Congregationalists. But they played an important role in the development of Christianity in Brazil. Significant in that regard was the arrival of the Congregational missionary Robert Reid Kalley and his wife Sarah in Rio de Janeiro in 1855, Presbyterians who had become convinced of congregational church polity shortly before arriving.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In a number of different ways, the Kalleys had a profound influence on the history of Christianity in Brazil. First were contributions to law. Robert Kalley became a close friend of the emperor, Pedro II, and helped the government draft legislation that increasingly liberalized freedom of religion. Remember, the freedom of religion offered by the first constitution of the Empire was somewhat limited. Also, he advocated for separation of church and state, so that by the time the Emperor was deposed and the Republic was founded in 1889, its new constitution officially declared separation of church and state. In a country that had long established Roman Catholicism as the official state religion, this was an important step forward.

The second major contribution that Kalley made to Brazilian Christianity was to help establish it as *Brazilian*—forming self-sufficient, indigenous churches. You might see a connection between that goal and his understanding of congregational polity. When the final authority over a church under Christ is the congregation rather than a denominational superstructure inherited from a foreign land, there is more focus on making the church indigenous. After all, that denominational superstructure, be it a Synod or a Presbytery or an Episcopacy, often has institutional connections to a foreign denomination. Sarah Kalley assembled a Brazilian hymnal, “Psalms and Hymns” that became very influential among various Protestant mission groups. Robert founded the Fluminense Evangelical Church where, as best we know, the first Brazilian baptism of a believer took place when Pedro Nolasco de Andrade was baptized on July 11, 1858.[[6]](#footnote-6) When de Andrade was baptized, the church membership numbered 14. But ten years later, it had reached 360 members, most of whom were Brazilian. The Fluminense Evangelical Church remains today. It’s the oldest Portuguese-speaking church in the country. Today, there are three different congregational denominations in Brazil, two of which stem from the Kalleys’ work.

Let’s move on to two additional missionary groups in Brazil. First, the Presbyterians.

*Presbyterians*

Their work began in 1859, and the first missionary sent was Ashbel Green Simonton.[[7]](#footnote-7) By 1862 the Presbyterian Church of Rio de Janeiro was founded, followed by the planting of several other Presbyterian churches in short order nearby, in São Paulo, and elsewhere. One Presbyterian pastor, José Manoel da Conceição, had first been a Roman Catholic priest in São Paulo but converted and was ordained as a minister in 1865. Somewhat surprisingly given that late date, he was the first Brazilian ordained as an evangelical pastor in Brazil. One significant contribution of the Presbyterians was the founding of the Mackenzie University in São Paulo, one of Brazil’s leading universities today. While Mackenzie’s faculty went theologically liberal like many other academic institutions, Mackenzie, and other Presbyterian colleges and seminaries, is now based on a sound understanding of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. But more on that later on.

*Baptists*

The last group we should visit before we move on to the 20th century is the Baptists. Not that Baptists were particularly influential in the 19th century, but they became more so as history went along. Baptists first came to Brazil as Confederates fleeing the United States at the end of the American civil war. They petitioned the Southern Baptist Convention to send missionaries, but this small group had very little influence on Baptist work in Brazil. The first Baptist missionary whose work would endure arrived in Brazil in 1881, founding a Baptist church in 1882 alongside Antonio de Albuquerque, another converted Roman Catholic priest. By 1888, there were eight Baptist churches in six different states with a total of 212 members. Ten years later, that had increased by a factor of 10. Today there are nine different Baptist denominations in Brazil. The largest of these is the Brazilian Baptist Convention, founded in 1907 as a result of work by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

This missionary activity coincided with a tumultuous time for Brazil. An 1889 military coup deposed the emperor, leading to a constitutional democracy that saw numerous revolts until the military seized control of the country in 1930. Congress was closed and political parties were abolished.

And what happened to Christianity during these years? It seemed only to grow. In 1903, there were about 88,000 members of Protestant Brazilian churches in the country. By 1916 that had roughly doubled, not counting non-Brazilian, immigrant churches. By 1935, when the Republic ended, those 88,000 had become 1.5 million members of Protestant churches. During this time, the main evangelical denominations, nearly all of which had been planted by missionaries, transitioned to having Brazilian leadership. But this happened peacefully, without a break in fellowship with the foreign denominations that gave them their start.

During this time, the foreign missionaries who came to Brazil largely adopted the practice of baptizing those who converted from Roman Catholicism. That was significant from the perspective of those individuals—making a clean break with their religious past. It was also significant for Protestantism in general because it made a clean distinction between the religion of the Protestants—centered on the same gospel we preach here—and the religion of Roman Catholicism. On the other hand, because of pressure from the Roman Catholic Church, Protestants in Brazil tended to move away from society, also making a clean distinction between the Christian community and the surrounding culture. That move largely paralleled the rise of fundamentalism back here in the United States. Though where fundamentalism in the United States was often a response to theological liberalism and modernism, in Brazil it was more a response to Roman Catholicism.

That summarizes the movements in Christianity up until World War II, which marks a significant turning point in Brazil, especially in its religious history.

**Post-War Brazil**

Brazil remained neutral at the beginning of the war, but when it was attacked by German and Italian submarines, it decided to enter the war alongside the Allies—eventually fighting in the Atlantic and sending soldiers and airmen to fight on the Italian front.

Politically, World War II ended with a shift to a democratic government, which lasted until a military coup in 1964. At first, the Brazilian economy boomed under the reforms imposed by the military. But by the 1970s, the economy had stagnated, some were deported or killed for political reasons, and censorship was imposed. In 1985, the country shifted back to civilian rule with 1989 marking the first time in recent years that a president was elected by popular vote.[[8]](#footnote-8) As you will know from all the recent press about the Brazilian elections, politics in Brazil continues to excite great passion within the country and elsewhere.

But politics isn’t our point here this morning. What happened to the church in Brazil during these years? Again: it grew. In 1940, evangelicals were only 2.6% of the Brazilian population. In 1950, they had reached 3.4%. From there, they continued to increase their portion of the Brazilian population, reaching 6.6% in 1980, then 9% in 1991, 15.4% in 2000, 22% in 2010.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the 1990s, Pentecostalism was growing faster than historical Protestantism, with that growth coming primarily from Baptists. Since then, they have roughly grown in parallel—though by some accounts Pentecostalism has begun to stall.[[10]](#footnote-10) Of course, growth has differed by geography. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, for example, growth by Baptists has well overshadowed Pentecostal growth.

Two stories will help us understand what’s inside these statistics: the story of theological liberalism, and the story of Pentecostalism.

*Theological Liberalism*

Starting in the 19th century, many theologians in the United States and Europe began questioning doctrines such as the reliability of Scripture, the miracles of Jesus, the reality of the bodily resurrection, and so forth. These antiquated ideas, they thought, were an affront to modern ways of thinking, and perhaps Christianity would do better without them. In the United States, this thinking affected nearly all the Christian denominations, with most of those denominations splitting into liberal and conservative factions in the early decades of the 20th century. In Brazil, these same battles happened later on, in the years following World War II. But from the end of the War until the military coup of 1964, theological liberalism was on the advance, especially in the 1950s, brought by American missionaries or Brazilians who studied in the United States and Europe. It’s a reminder that when we work hard to protect the theological fidelity of a group like the Southern Baptist Convention, who is one of the world’s largest funders of seminaries and missionaries, we are serving not just ourselves but many others around the world.

And this is where Brazil’s political history intersects its religious history. One prominent feature of theological liberalism tends to be the uniting of historic Christian organizations. But with the military coup in 1964, these organizations ceased to exist, slowing the progress of theological liberalism. As the country liberalized later in the 20th century, other groups were formed, such as the National Council of Churches—but these efforts proved to be very limited in their effect.

One notable aspect of the story of modern Christian history in Brazil is how the tide has turned against theological liberalism. Of the mainline denominations in the United States, all were at one time affected by this strain of teaching, but only one—the Southern Baptists—managed to pull its denominational agencies back to a Bible-believing faith. In Brazil, the mainline denominations have fared better. In recent years the Presbyterian Church of Brazil—the largest Reformed body in the country—has returned to its theologically conservative roots. Significantly, as I mentioned earlier, this has also returned the theological faculty at Mackenzie University, one of Brazil’s oldest and best known institutes of higher education, to evangelical convictions.[[11]](#footnote-11) That would be a little bit like Princeton Seminary returning to its roots after a hundred years of teaching liberalism. In addition, the Methodists have undergone a similar change. In their 2006 General Assembly, the Pentecostal party within that denomination came to power, pushing out the old, mainline liberals and breaking their ecumenical ties with the Roman Catholic Church. The Independent Presbyterian Church, an indigenous denomination that split from the main Presbyterian body in 1903, decided to close its seminaries—which had become heavily influenced by liberal theology. In their place, they opened a new one that held true to historic Christian teaching. And most of the main Baptist denominations never quite went liberal as they did in the United States, though they did have some liberal professors in their seminaries. So overall, Brazil has done better in this battle than many other places around the world.

*Pentecostalism*

Now, I’ve mentioned Pentecostalism several times already. It’s time to look at the rise of Pentecostalism in Brazil, which largely parallels its rise in the United States. That history starts in the early 20th century with Luigi Francescon, an Italian, and his wife Rosina Balzono. Living in Chicago, they began attending a church that had been heavily influenced by the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. They experienced a “baptism by the Holy Spirit” and decided to quit their life in Chicago and move to South America as missionaries. They arrived in Buenos Aires in 1909 but quickly moved on to São Paulo. There they began work with the Presbyterian church but were soon expelled for speaking in tongues and for encouraging people to seek a baptism by the Holy Spirit. With believers of similar persuasion from other Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, they formed the Christian Congregation in Brazil and saw explosive growth—seeing more than two million people baptized between 1956 and 1996. This church has frequently described itself as the only true church in Brazil, even to the exclusion of other Pentecostals.

Largely independent of that group was another Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God. Interestingly, this group in Brazil comes not from the American Assemblies of God denomination but from Baptists in America. Specifically, a Swedish Baptist named Daniel Berg, who emigrated from Sweden to Chicago in 1902, believed himself to have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Understanding himself to have received a supernatural call from God, he moved to Brazil, where he was joined by others influenced by the Azusa Street revival. Together, they contacted the Assemblies of God in the States and asked if they could set up a Brazilian counterpart. By 1950, this group numbered nearly 100,000, and by 2000, more than 14 million.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Pentecostalism is generally marked by a freedom of expression in corporate worship and a belief that all true Christians must receive a second blessing of the Holy Spirit—which is normally understood to involve speaking in tongues. It often involves prophets whose prophecies are to be taken with the same weight as, or even superseding, Scripture. And in recent years it has heavily commingled with the prosperity gospel. So while in some places Pentecostals have had a positive influence—for instance, helping return the Methodist denomination to greater theological fidelity—in many places its influence has been quite harmful to legitimate Christianity.

As I mentioned earlier, though, the growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil has begun to slow in recent years. As one Brazilian seminary professor has written, “Pentecostalism, after a hundred years in Brazil, has run its course and has left many Pentecostals hungry and thirsty for a more biblical and solid theology that, at the same time, allows and calls for experiential religion.[[13]](#footnote-13) That’s one seminary professor’s opinion. Based on the little reading I’ve done, it seems somewhat overstated, somewhat overly optimistic about Pentecostalism having run its course.

Nevertheless, the works of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in particular, have attracted the attention of many Pentecostals because of his beliefs about the baptism of the Holy Spirit,[[14]](#footnote-14) leading many into Calvin and the Puritans. In Brazil, then, you’ll have the odd experience of finding Puritan and Reformed authors published by large, established Pentecostal publishing houses. As a result of this interest, many new independent churches have arisen in recent years that are Reformed in theology and Pentecostal in practice. Quoting that same professor, “What will become of this apparently strange union is still uncertain. However, one thing is clear, that the Reformed faith has received a fresh and powerful impulse through these Pentecostals-turned-Reformed.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Conclusion**

What is it like to be an evangelical Christian in Brazil today? Today, theologically rooted evangelical Protestants in Brazil find themselves caught between, first, the Roman Catholic Church, with its longstanding syncretic mix of spiritism and popular piety. Second, there’s the overwhelming prevalence of Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. Third, there’s a trend of increasing secularism whose overall impact remains to be seen.

So where all this leave Christianity in Brazil? It’s hard to say—I think that the class today has been a mixture of good news and bad news, a reminder that God does indeed move in mysterious ways—but that his gospel will finally prevail. Brazil’s history is instructive for us here in the States, reminding us of the value of religious freedom. It reminds us of the global good that can come from keeping our religious institutions faithful to the gospel here at home, so long as American Christianity continues to have an influence on the rest of the world. And it reminds us that while parachurch institutions come and go, the gospel continues to advance.

1. Unless otherwise noted, most of this class is based on “Christianity in Brazil” by Franklin Ferreira in *The Christian Church in History* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2016) as translated by Vinicius Musselman Pimentel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Brazil’s Christian Roots* by George Guilherme in Christianity Today, April 1, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Brazil’s Surging Spirituality* by Kenneth Macharg in Christianity Today, December 4, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Catholic_Church_in_Brazil#cite_note-8>, which cites John Lloyd Meacham, *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 263–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Medeiros, Pedro. "A Legislação do Brasil Império e a estratégia missionária de Robert Kalley" (in Portuguese). Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro [ Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Curthoys, M. C. (October 2009). "Kalley, Robert Reid (1809–1888)". Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Named after Ashbel Green but not related to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\_of\_Brazil [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (BIGS) census data. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. von Sinner, Rudolf (2012). "Pentecostalism". *Brazil Today: An Encyclopedia of Life in the Republic*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Recent Trends in Brazilian Evangelicalism” by Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, PhD. Page 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Christianity in Latin America, A History* by Justo Gonzalez and Ondina Gonzalez, pages 281-283. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Lopes,* page 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lloyd-Jones believed in such a baptism but understood it to be exceptional, not a universal experience among Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)