The Huguenot Mission to Brazil, 1556–58

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Positive Action for Christ

Introduction

The modern descendants of the Protestant Reformation crisscross the globe with the gospel of Christ. Yet over the past five centuries many people and groups have debated the origin of this zeal. Over 150 years passed after 1517 before the first evidences of sustained missionary efforts appeared with the ministries of John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew among Native Americans. William Carey, the "father of modern missions," departed England for India nearly three centuries after Luther helped spark the Reformation.

Authors have debated the reasons for this gap, some condemnatory of the Reformers while others are defensive. Robert Bellarmine, a late sixteenth-century Catholic bishop, criticized contemporary Protestants for their lack of missionary work. He disparaged "they have hardly converted even so much as a handful [of Jews or Turks]."[1] A renewal of anti-missionary criticism resurfaced during the turn of the twentieth century as the Student Volunteer Movement renewed interest in the history of missions. Authors such as Gustav Warneck (1906) decried what they viewed as a woeful lack of missionary zeal among Luther, Calvin, and their successors. In the last half century, a renewed appreciation for the reformers has led to a fresh look at their contribution to modern missions. Contemporary authors, for example Michael Haykin, write defending the missionary vision and legacy of Calvin and those of that tradition.[2]

Fully addressing the nuances of a five-hundred-year-old question lies beyond the scope of a single paper or single author. However, a history of one event may offer us some first steps toward an answer. By far, the undertaking that stands out as the most commonly referenced evidence for Protestant missions in the sixteenth century is a Huguenot voyage to Brazil. Any work that makes positive reference to missionary endeavors during the Reformation Era inevitably includes something of this mission. Kenneth Scott Latourette deems the endeavor important enough to mention in two

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[1] The translation is taken from Stephen Neill, Christian Missions, The Pelican History of the Church 6, ed. Owen Chadwick (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 221. For original source and context of the quotation see the chapter entitled De Notis Ecclesiae in Roberti Bellarmini, De Controversiis Christianae Fidei Adversus Hujus Temporsis Haereticos, vol. 2 of Opera Omnia (Neapoli: Apud Josephum Giuliano, 1857 [1581-1593]), 111-43.

[2] Michael Haykin, *To the Ends of the Earth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 71–73.

separate sections of his history of Christian expansion.[3] In one of the earliest works on the history of Protestant missions, William Brown spends the entire first chapter covering this one undertaking.[4] More recently, the voyage has become the central topic of several lectures and journal articles.[5] Yet in spite of the vast interest in this event, much misinformation pervades the treatments offered in the available histories.

The most accessible primary source for the Huguenot expedition is Jean de Léry's *History* (1578).[6] As a member of the mission, he provides a firsthand narrative of the episode. The majority of the work records the flora and fauna of Brazil as well as in-depth discussions of the natives' lifestyle and religion. The sections dealing with the historical elements of the mission provide great detail, including precise dates and the names of all of the major individuals who took part in the expedition. The fact that the work was drawn from journals kept while de Léry was on the voyage and in the country gives much validity to the accuracy of the data.[7]

In spite of the overall quality of the work, certain elements of the journals warrant a cautious examination. De Léry freely admits that his work was written not merely as a history but also as an apology against certain falsehoods published by the Roman Catholic monk André Thevet in *La Cosmographie Universelle* (*The Universal Cosmography*).[8] The work also suffers from an eighteen-year delay in publication. This delay resulted in it being published after certain key characters in the narrative were unable to corroborate or refute the facts contained in the work.[9] Gaspard de Coligny, Grand Admiral of France

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[3] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Three Centuries of Advance, A. D. 1500 – A. D. 1800*, vol. 3 of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1939), 43, 236. That Latourette chose to mention this event in two separate places is especially noteworthy as the work has less than ten pages covering the whole first two centuries of Protestant missionary work. No other event from those two hundred years receives similar treatment.

[4] The Propagation of Christianity Among the Heathen, Since the Reformation (Philadelphia: McCarty and Davis, 1820), 17–19.

[5] At the 2017 National Conference of The Gospel Coalition in Indianapolis, IN, the event was mentioned by both Stephen Nichols in "Luther's Distinctive Theological Contributions" and by Michael Haykin in "The Missionary Legacy of the Reformation." The most through and accurate treatment of the mission to Brazil in the secondary literature is the lecture presented by R. Pierce Beaver entitled "The Genevan Mission to Brazil." Another interesting article that focuses more on the practical issues of the mission rather than its theological elements is Amy Glassner Gordon, "The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why Did It Fail?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, no. 1 (January 1984): 12–18.

[6] Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, trans. Janet Whatley (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990).

[7] Ibid., xlv. Most of the memoirs upon which de Léry relied were "written with Brailwood ink, and in America itself."

[8] Ibid., xlvi.

[9] Ibid., xlv-xlvi. Jean de Léry begins the preface of his work by saying, "One might well be amazed that, having made the voyage to America eighteen years ago, I have waited so long to bring this history out: therefore it has seemed only proper that I explain what has impeded me"

and patron of the expedition, was murdered during the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in August of 1572. Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, the commander of the colony who eventually expelled de Léry and his comrades, gave a different testimony as to what had occurred in Brazil, but he died January 9, 1571. Calvin, whose role in this episode rested in the writing and receiving of epistles, died in 1564.[10] If these men had been alive when de Léry published his work, some of the questions that persist today may have been answered or at least debated by the people actually involved. In spite of these elements, de Léry provides the most thorough and accurate account of the expedition available today.

The Establishment of the Colony

A small island just off the coast of what is known today as the Bay of Rio de Janeiro provides the setting for this episode in Reformation history. France, a latecomer to the colonial enterprise, had already established trapping and trading posts in the New World and in the 1550s sought a stronger foothold in the Southern Hemisphere.[11] In order to accomplish this goal, Gaspard de Coligny, the Grand Admiral of France, petitioned Henry II, king of France, to commission the establishment of a French fort in Brazil. This violated the Treaty of Tordesillas, which had been approved by Pope Julius II and divided the Western Hemisphere between Spain and Portugal, the latter controlling the area of the attempted French settlement. In preparation for the inevitable conflict

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(xlv). He proceeds by explaining that upon his return, he showed his "memoirs" to many friends and yielded to their request to prepare a "rather full report" (xlv) in 1563. Since he was at the time in the process of moving, he entrusted the manuscript to a "reliable person." When this person sought to return the document, it was seized from the hands of the messengers at the city gates of Lyon. "A notable Seigneur," upon hearing the story, took it upon himself to retrieve the manuscript and in 1576 return it to de Léry.

[10] The greatest controversy surrounding this enterprise is whether Villegagnon wrote letters to Calvin specifically requesting Geneva to send ministers to Brazil. This is the testimony given by de Léry and other Reformed historians, but Villegagnon vehemently denied any such action every opportunity he was given to speak on the matter. Shortly after returning from the failed expedition, he even challenged Calvin to a debate concerning the matter. However Calvin never responded to the challenge. Villegagnon also had a vested interest in denying that he had sent the letters. See de Léry, 4-5; and A. Perbal, "Non-Roman Catholic in Latin America," *International Review of Missions* 49, no. 196 (October 1960): 458.

[11] Beaver, 57–58. Spain and Portugal led the exploration of the new world in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI divided the new world between these two Roman Catholic powers along the longitude 100 leagues west of the Azores. Spain was awarded everything to the west of the line and Portugal received all newly discovered lands to the east. In 1506, the treaty of Tordesillas included a provision moving the line an additional 270 leagues to the west. This treaty was approved by Pope Julius II, making it binding on all Roman Catholic rulers. This means that Henry II was acting in violation of the church in commissioning the settlement in Brazil.

with Portugal, Coligny selected a military and naval veteran, Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, to head the expedition.[12] Villegagnon departed France in May of 1555 with an initial force of six hundred men who were to help explore the area and construct a defensible settlement. The fleet arrived in November, and the men began construction of Fort Coligny.

Establishing a colony proved unexpectedly difficult, making the success of the undertaking doubtful. In a letter to Calvin,[13] Villegagnon listed the initial difficulties faced by the expedition. First, the land itself appeared inhospitable to the company being "all wilderness, and untilled."[14] In addition, the Europeans' initial reaction to the natives was one of horror and disgust. Villegagnon described them as "wild and savage people, remote from all courtesy and humanity . . . without religion, nor any knowledge of honesty or virtue . . . so that it seemed to me that we had fallen among beasts bearing a human countenance."[15] Besides the indigenous peoples, the French had reason to fear an imminent attack from the Portuguese, who were displeased with the incursion into their territory.[16] A final difficulty arose from the lack of women among the original settlers. Villegagnon, as a Knight of Malta, had taken a vow of chastity, but his letters indicate that many of the men with him did not share such convictions. This necessitated the governor enacting laws that prohibited interaction between the colonists and the female natives.[17]

As a result of these difficulties, several of the men who had traveled to the New World on the initial voyage returned to the comforts of France within the year. In the same letter to Calvin, Villegagnon reported that "the brothers who had come over here from France with me . . . had withdrawn into Egypt."[18] De Léry interprets the "withdraw

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[12] Beaver, 58–59. Villegagnon's qualifications as a French soldier were many. He took part in campaigns in both Algiers and the Piedmont, receiving a citation for bravery in the first. Next he turned to naval service. In the service of the French navy, he traveled to Scotland to help facilitate the escape of Mary Queen of Scots, during which he sailed around the northern coast of Scotland in order to evade a fleet of English ships. After other victories, he was appointed to the position of vice admiral of Brittany.

[13] Amy Gordon seems mistakenly to equate this letter with the letter sent to Geneva requesting ministers and settlers of the Reformed faith be sent to Brazil. Rather, this is the letter that was sent back to Geneva in response to the arrival of the group of Genevans. This is evident from the opening line, which expresses Villegagnon's joy from Calvin's letters and "the brothers who brought them." de Léry, xlix; and Gordon, 17, n. 4. The letter requesting ministers and additional settlers will be discussed in the following section.

[14] de Léry, xlix. He is quoting from the letter sent by Villegagnon to Calvin.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., xlix–l.

[17] For a fuller treatment of the difficulties associated with the absence of women on the Brazil expedition, see Gordon, 12–18.

[18] de Léry, xlix. If there were Huguenots among the first group of settlers, this letter indicates that they returned to France rather than remain and face the difficulties of establishing the new colony.

into Egypt" as defection from the Reformed faith back into Catholicism.[19] However, the context suggests the probability that the withdrawal that Villegagnon lamented was not a religious change as much as a return to France, evidenced by his contrasting them with "those who had remained."[20] The remaining group, composed of "poor, wretched folk, and mercenaries," did not contain the type of people Villegagnon believed could build the colony.[21]

The Sending of the Missionaries

Fort Coligny might have become a brief footnote in French colonial history if it were not for a letter sent by Villegagnon to Geneva in 1557. The letter requested the sending of additional settlers to help in the work as well as ministers to curb the low morality among the men already in Brazil.[22] Jean de Léry records that Villegagnon "wrote and sent a man to Geneva expressly to request that the church and its ministers help him as much as possible in his holy enterprise."[23] Villegagnon later denied sending letters specifically to Calvin or Geneva and demanded that they be produced, a demand that the Geneveans were unable to meet.[24] It is possible that the letters had been sent to Coligny and then forward on to Geneva. Whatever the source of the letters, the Company of Preachers in Geneva responded by gathering a group of thirteen French refugees willing to undertake the voyage under the leadership of a fourteenth Huguenot, Philippe de Corguilleray, Sieur du Pont. Two of these men, Pierre Richier and Guillaume Chartier, upon being examined by the Company, were appointed as preachers to "undertake to spread the Gospel in America,"[25] while the other eleven offered their services to both promote Christ in the New World and to aid in the establishment of the colony. The Company's register contains this brief notation concerning the event:

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[19] Ibid., liii.

[20] Ibid., xlix.

[21] Ibid.

[22] de Léry, xlix–li. Villegagnon sent a letter to Calvin in 1557 after the arrival of the group of Huguenots which is preserved in the introduction to de Léry's *History*. In the letter, he describes the people left under his leadership in a very disparaging manner. He also mentions at least one conspiracy among the people to murder him.

[23] Ibid., 4. A fuller treatment of this controversy appears at the end of this section.

[24] The reason suggested for the loss of the letters was the mortal illness of the secretary of the Company of Pastors in Geneva. This also accounts for the brief and sketchy recording of this episode in the Company's minutes. See Beaver, 60–61. The Roman Catholic historians suggest that the original letters containing only a general request for additional troops and ministers were sent to Coligny who then forwarded them to Geneva in order to secure Reformed pastors. See A. Perbal, 456. Both sides rely upon biased witnesses to support their positions.

[25] de Léry, 5.

> On Tuesday 25 August, in consequence of the receipt of a letter requesting this church to send ministers to the new islands [Brazil], which the French had conquered, M. Pierre Richer and M. Guillaume Chartier were elected. These two were subsequently commended to the care of the Lord and sent off with a letter from this church.[26]

This group of fourteen men faced a long and dangerous journey to reach their destination. They began by traveling from Geneva to Paris, where they faced the threat of arrest under the current French religious laws.[27] This fact would have been fresh on the minds of the Genevans since three other men carrying letters from Calvin had been imprisoned in France on the first day of August that same year.[28] After reaching Paris, they were joined by "several gentlemen and some others" bringing the total number of Huguenots to an estimated twenty-five or thirty individuals.[29] The enlarged group moved to Honfleur where they embarked on the nineteenth of November, 1556, with the rest of the two hundred ninety new settlers and sailors aboard three ships destined for Brazil.[30] These new recruits brought the total number of inhabitants of Fort Coligny to about nine hundred men, among whom there were fewer than three dozen (perhaps as little as half that number) who held to the Reformed faith.

Conflict with Villegagnon

From the time of their arrival at Fort Coligny on March 10, the Genevans faced prolonged difficulties. After a brief welcome from Villegagnon and a short sermon from Richier at the governor's request, the new arrivals were put to work. De Léry comments

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[26] The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, trans. Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 317.

[27] The dangerous nature of the situation in France is illustrated by the extreme caution taken by the Company of Preachers in Geneva when sending ministers into that country. Many letters sent from Calvin were signed with pseudonyms in order to protect the bearer and the recipient. And names of those sent to minister in Catholic areas were often not even recorded in the *Register* for fear of the men's safety. Philip E. Hughes, "John Calvin: Director of Missions," in *The Heritage of John Calvin: Heritage Hall Lectures, 1960-1970*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 46–48.

[28] Ibid., 50. The three men were later executed.

[29] Ibid., 6. Jean de Léry does not give an exact count of the number of Protestants among the 290 new settlers on this second voyage. The estimate comes from adding the "fifteen or sixteen" de Léry says were "of our company" at the end of their stay in Brazil (48), the ten young boys taken to learn the natives language (7), and the five young women and their governess who traveled with the group to be married to men already in Brazil (7). These last two groups may not have been Huguenots since the language used by de Léry is relatively vague as to their religious allegiances. These were also the first women to arrive at the colony, the first voyage having only male settlers.

[30] de Léry, 7. The three ships were the *Petite Roberge*, the *Grande Roberge*, and *Rosée*.

tongue-in-cheek that "to refresh us from our sea-toil, they took us to haul stones and earth in this Fort of Coligny that they were continuing to build. Such was the fine treatment that Villegagnon offered us from the very day of our arrival."[31] Yet in spite of being forced to work in their travel-weary condition, in the heat of the climate, and with meager rations, they still held great expectations for the work that lay ahead of them. The minister Richier went so far as to say that they "had found in Villegagnon a second Saint Paul."[32] The governor also gave orders that the new ministers hold times of prayer every evening after the day's labors, preach an hour service every workday, and preach two services on Sundays.[33] On the second Sunday after their arrival (March 21), the Genevans held the first Lord's Supper in Fort Coligny according to the Reformed practice. Villegagnon attended the service and was the first to receive Communion, after commanding all who were not of the Reformed faith to leave the building.[34]

This was to be the only peaceful celebration of the Lord's Supper. Trouble soon arose from a former student of the Sorbonne, Jean Cointac, who "claimed that Villegagnon had promised to make him bishop of the colony."[35] Though he had taken part in the first Communion service and had even successfully undergone an examination by the Genevan ministers, he soon raised objections to their doctrines and practices. Villegagnon sided with Cointac in the dispute, maybe in part because the governor had received letters from the Cardinal of Lorraine warning him to renounce the Calvinist heresy.[36] He even declared "openly that he had changed the opinion concerning Calvin that he had formerly claimed to have . . . [and] said that Calvin was a wicked heretic who had strayed from the faith."[37]

The breach between the governor and the Genevans increased when the latter group refused to work any longer on the fort. They sent word by Sieur du Pont saying, "Since he [Villegagnon] had rejected the gospel, we were in no way his subjects, and did not intend to be his servants any longer; even less were we willing to continue carrying earth and stones to his fort."[38] Villegagnon responded by cutting off their rations of root

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[31] Ibid., 34.

[32] de Léry, 35. Initially Villegagnon spoke very persuasively in support of the Reformed faith.

[33] Ibid., 35.

[34] Ibid., 36. De Léry also records two prayers Villegagnon offered after receiving the first communion. They contain many elements of the Reformed teachings.

[35] Beaver, 68.

[36] Beaver, 69. Jean de Léry puts forth a second possible cause for Villegagnon's sudden change of attitude toward the Genevans. In addition to the rumor that he had received threatening letters from the Cardinal of Lorraine, de Léry suggests that he might have from the beginning "conspired with the Cardinal de Lorraine to feign the Religion." de Léry, 46.

[37] de Léry, 45.

[38] Ibid., 47.

flour and by threatening some of them with being chained like his slaves.[39] Finally, after eight months on the island, the Genevans were commanded to move to the mainland. They settled a little over a mile up the coast in La Briqueterie where there were some huts previously used by French traders.[40]

Work with the Natives Before and During the Exile

Previous to the exile, the men from Geneva had interacted with the native Brazilians, and the interaction now increased as the settlers were forced to fend for themselves. Much of the contact between the Europeans and the Brazilians consisted of commerce. This was made necessary because the island upon which Fort Coligny was built lacked any source of fresh water, and the French had failed to make the land yield crops in sufficient quantity for the population. To meet their needs, the settlers procured water by means of cisterns, but the excess food had to be purchased from the natives.[41] The Genevans took part in some of these trading expeditions as well as exploration of the surrounding countryside. This allowed de Léry and others of his group to interact on many occasions with the natives.[42] When Villegagnon cut the Genevans' rations in response to their refusal to perform further work, de Léry claims it caused them little trouble since in trade with the natives the men were "getting more for a billhook or two or three knives than he [Villegagnon] would have given us in half a year."[43] Even in exile, de Léry reports that the Brazilians "often came to visit us, bringing us food and other things we needed."[44]

The interactions with the natives extended at times beyond mere commerce to attempts to minister the gospel. The minister Pierre Richier did not see much hope for the conversion of the "savages" and described them as "cannibals, crassly stupid, incapable of distinguishing good from evil."[45] However, he was not entirely pessimistic and accepted the field to which he had been commissioned, writing in a letter to Calvin, "Since where the Most High has given us this task, we expect this Edom to become a

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[39] Ibid., 47–48, 72. Because the French had trouble growing wheat on the island, flour was produced by milling a special root that the natives used as the staple of their diet. De Léry describes in detail the difficulties that the French faced trying to produce the three crops they had brought with them from Europe: wheat, rye, and grapes.

[40] de Léry, 49–50.

[41] Ibid., 54.

[42] Ibid., 55. Jean de Léry reports having traveled nearly twenty leagues upriver into the mainland. During these journeys, he had "been in many villages among the savages who live in various parts."

[43] de Léry, 48.

[44] Ibid., 50.

[45] Beaver, 63.

future possession of Christ."[46] De Léry spent a considerable amount of time among the natives and also had opportunities to preach to them. On one occasion after observing the Europeans praying at a meal, a native asked, "What does this mean, this way of doing things, taking off your hat twice, and remaining silent except for one speaker? To whom was all that addressed, those things he was saying?"[47] De Léry seized the opportunity to teach the assembled group about the Christian God. On another occasion, he was singing Psalm 104 when his four Brazilian traveling companions asked about the words. As they continued their journey, he explained that he had "in general praised my God for the beauty and governance of his creatures."[48] Opportunities like these contributed to de Léry's belief that "if Villegagnon had not revolted from the Reformed Religion, and if we had stayed longer in that country, we would have drawn and won some of them [the natives] to Jesus Christ."[49] In spite of these interactions, there is no record of any native conversions.

Return to France

The ten-month expedition of the missionaries from Geneva to Brazil ended with difficulties similar to those it had faced all along. After only two months on the mainland, the fifteen Genevans were able to secure passage onboard the *Jacques*, a merchant ship heading for France. Unbeknownst to the passengers, Villegagnon sought to strike a final blow against the band upon their return to Europe and sent letters calling for their indictment and execution as heretics by the first French judge they encountered. Fortuitously, the captain of the ship developed a close attachment to the Huguenots and surrendered the letters into their care. [50]

Less than ten leagues into the journey home, the *Jacques* began to leak. The carpenter and the master's mate advised abandoning the ship and finding other means of transportation to France, fearing that the ship would sink or be so slowed in its travel that the stores would not last for the entire voyage.[51] At this point, five of the fifteen Huguenots chose to return to the Brazilian coast rather than hazard the two-fold dangers being predicted. Of those that returned, only two made it back to France; the other three were condemned by Villegagnon as heretics and drowned in the ocean.[52]

The ones who remained on the ship faced their own share of suffering. The ship was indeed unable to travel at normal speeds due to the leak, and the pace was further

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[46] Ibid., 64.
[47] de Léry, 146.
[48] de Léry, 149.
[49] Ibid., 147.
[50] Ibid., 197.
[51] de Léry, 199.
[52] Ibid., 200.

hindered by a navigational error and the loss of some sails in a fire that occurred on April 15.[53] With all these factors, the voyage stretched into a long, taxing enterprise. As predicted, a severe famine resulted, reducing the crew to eating the animals that they had been transporting from the New World.[54] Finally, the crew spotted Lower Brittany on May 24, 1558, five months and twenty days after departing Brazil.[55] The cost in lives to the crew had been great. Five of the sailors died during the famine, and half of those who survived died from over-consumption upon arriving at port.[56] However, all ten of the Genevans survived the voyage.[57]

In less than two years, the French colony in Brazil ceased to exist. Fredrick Quinn sums up this brief historical episode as follows:

> In late 1559, Villegagnon ended his four years in Brazil and took 50 Brazilians with him back to France. He was well-received by the king and the Catholic court; the adverse reports spread by the returned Calvinists were to no avail. The Brazil colony languished. Before France could decide what to do with it, the Portuguese struck on February 26, 1560, when Men de Sa, the Portuguese governor, began a sustained bombardment of the island fort. On March 15 Portuguese and Brazilians made a daring night raid on the fort, now defended by only a small band of French and Brazilians, and seized the remnants of the French presence in Brazil.[58]

If you were to visit Rio de Janeiro today, you would find the small island of this narrative still guarding the entrance of Guanabara Bay. In 1893, the Brazilian Naval Revolts resulted in the destruction of the Portuguese fort that had replaced Fort Coligny. The island, now called the Island of Villegagnon, houses the Naval School (established in 1938).

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[53] Ibid., 207–08.

[54] Ibid., 209-11. De Léry reports that the famine became so bad that he saw the cannoneer "eat the raw guts of a parrot." The crew ate the leather shields that were carried onboard and then stripped the leather from the luggage. Finally, the crew was reduced to hunting the rats that hid among the cargo. The rats became so valuable that they were sold for up to four crowns apiece.

[55] de Léry, 213.

[56] Ibid., 215.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Fredrick Quinn, *The French Overseas Empire* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 26.

Comments on Nature of the Brazil Mission

Some authors describe the establishment of the fort as an attempt to plant a colony for the persecuted Huguenots of France where they could worship in safety.[59] This belief comes from the following statement in de Léry's *History*:

> In the year 1555 a certain Villegagnon . . . let it be known to several distinguished personages of various ranks throughout the realm of France that he had long yearned to withdraw into some distant country, where he might freely and purely serve God according to the reformation of the Gospel, and, moreover, that he desired to prepare a place for all those who might wish to retire there to escape persecution. . . . Under this fine
> pretext, he won the hearts of some of the nobility who were of the Reformed Religion, who, with the same motives that he claimed to have, wished to find such a retreat. Among them was Gaspard de Coligny of blessed memory, Admiral of France.[60]

However, there are many elements of the history that point to the establishment of a Huguenot colony as something other than the primary purpose.

Although Admiral Coligny held to the Reformed faith, his actions in this situation point primarily to military rather than religious purposes in several aspects of the undertaking. The selection of Brazil, situated as it was in a part of the New World claimed by the Portuguese, required that the colony be a military outpost in order to assure survival. A settlement in Canada, claimed by the French since 1534, would not have required more than a minimal defense.[61] The fact that Henry II approved the mission also indicates that it was not primarily religious in nature. The king may have been willing to tolerate Huguenots when they supported his purposes of expanding French power or increasing revenue, but his position as a Catholic ruler limited his willingness to surrender over much to the Protestants. His motivation for the expedition likely came from the promise of financial gains through the new colony. He and Catherine de Medici had visited Rouen in 1550 to take part in a Brazilian festival hosted by the local merchant

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[59] David J. Bosch writing about Calvin's view of expanding the kingdom of God says, "If fits completely into this framework that Calvin should co-operate in the selection of two of the twelve missionaries whom Gaspard de Coligny sent to Brazil *to found a Christian colony*" (emphasis added). *Witness to the World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 122. Kenneth Latourette also writes of the "attempt (1555–56) of French Protestants under Nicholas Durand, better known as Villegagnon, *to found a colony in Brazil*" (emphasis added). *Three Centuries of Advance* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 43.

[60] de Léry, 3–4.

[61] By 1555, the French had sent several expeditions to the land known today as Canada. They were already on friendly terms with the native tribes, and a few forts had been built that could offer temporary shelter. Quinn, 20–24.

community. A play during the festivities hinted at the profitability for France of establishing a colony in Brazil.[62] Seemingly convinced, Henry commissioned a mapmaker to draw a map of Brazil for use in future exploration and instructed Coligny to make necessary preparations.[63]

The religious composition of the original expedition also points to a primary purpose other than the establishment of a Huguenot colony. If Coligny had intended to create a Reformed safe house in Brazil, at least one Reformed minister would likely have been among the initial six hundred settlers. However, the only clergy member among the first settlers was a Roman Catholic monk named André Trevet.[64] Coligny also could have initially made use of his contact with Reformed leaders such as John Calvin to provide ministers or direction. Yet, in spite of Edwin Bliss referring to this as the "Calvin-Coligny expedition to Brazil,"[65] there is no evidence that Coligny contacted Calvin during the initial planning of the expedition. If such correspondence had occurred, the reception of the letter from Villegagnon requesting ministers would have been anticipated.

Coligny's selection of Villegagnon as governor of the colony was questionable, at best, if his goal was to create a safe haven for Huguenots. Though Villegagnon had privately declared himself a new devotee to the Reformed faith shortly before the establishment of the colony, his previous record was that of a fervent Catholic. He had been honored with inclusion in the Catholic order of the Knights of Malta in the 1530s[66] and had been entrusted with transporting the young Mary, future queen of Scotland, to France in 1548.[67] Jean de Léry, in his *History*, questions the sincerity of Villegagnon's profession of the Reformed faith since he almost immediately turned against the settlers from Geneva.[68] Mare Lescarbot, author of *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* (1609), was well acquainted with Villegagnon. He writes that the commander "never was anything but a Roman Catholic, and that he made all this pretense simply because at the time he needed Coligny's backing for his expedition."[69] Upon returning to France after failing to establish a permanent settlement, Villegagnon asserted repeatedly in public and in writing that he

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[62] Quinn, 25.

[63] Ibid., 25–26.

[64] de Léry, lv. According to Jean de Léry, Trevet only remained in Brazil for about ten weeks. He spent most of the visit gathering information about flora and fauna rather than ministering to religious needs.

[65] Edwin M. Bliss, The Missionary Enterprise: A Concise History of Its Objects, Methods and Extension (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 53.

[66] Claire E. Engel, *Knights of Malta: A Gallery of Portraits* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1963), 24

[67] Ibid., 26.

[68] De Léry speaks of Villegagnon "pretending to be burning with zeal to advance the reign of Jesus Christ." de Léry, 4.

[69] G. Baez-Camargo, "The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America," *Church History* 21 (June 1952), 138.

had always held to Catholic doctrine and even challenged Calvin to public debate, a challenge that was declined.[70] The final assessment of Villegagnon must be that he was a religious opportunist who readily switched professions to fit his agenda.

The evidence indicates that some contemporaries did view the Brazilian colony as an opportunity to establish a place for Huguenots to worship in safety. However, this purpose appears to have been a tertiary goal while, for most supporters and members of the expedition, military and trade concerns were paramount. Thus, the Genevan mission to Brazil was more of a mission of opportunity rather than a mission of design. Nevertheless, the Brazil mission demonstrates the existence of a nascent understanding of the need to spread the gospel overseas.

Conclusion

The missionary seed within the reformers' evangelical theology would continue to grow haltingly, occasionally resisted by some of their own successors. Growing colonial endeavors by Protestant nations carried the gospel to new lands and native people. A few early prophets of world missions wrote of the continuing burden of the Great Commission, again with significant opposition from Protestant leaders, but some listened. The idea took root and found fertile soil in the second, more pietistic wave of reformation during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Finally the theology and the heart for a lost world combined, emboldening a Particular Baptist minister named William Carey to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

[70] Gordon, 12.

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