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Missions And The Challenge Of Conversion

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Diller, Lisa Clark, "Missions And The Challenge Of Conversion" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 25.
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May 05, 2010

Missions And The Challenge Of Conversion



by Lisa Clark Diller

What does conversion mean?

From 7th century missionaries to the Iroquois:

I have attacked Drunkenness and Debauchery, which are, as it were, the divinities of this country, for these peoples are madly attached to them. These vices I have combated by invoking the fear of God's judgment and, along with that, the dread of the armed might of a great king, whose name alone is enough to hold them to their duty. I have tried to win them over with the greatest possible gentleness and intimacy. I have tried to join what they love so passionately to that which they ought to love even more so that they might receive instruction without any unpleasantness.

Jean Pierron, "Of the Mission of the Martyrs in the Country of the Mohawks or the Lower Iroquois," 1669-1670 in *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth Century North America*, Allan Greer, ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000, pp. 141-142.

From 6th century missionaries to what is now France:

We have heard that some of you make vows to trees, pray to fountains, and practice diabolical augury. Because of this there is such sorrow in our hearts that we cannot receive any consolation. What is worse, there are some unfortunate and miserable people who not only are unwilling to destroy the shrines of the pagans, but even are not afraid or ashamed to

build up those which have been destroyed. Moreover, if anyone with a thought of God wants to burn the wood of those shrines or to tear to pieces and destroy the diabolical altars, they become angry, rave with fury, and are excited with excessive frenzy. They even go so far as to dare to strike those who out of love for God are trying to overthrow the wicked idols; perhaps they do not even hesitate to plan their death. What are these unfortunate, miserable people doing? They are deserting the light and running to darkness; they reject God and embrace the Devil. . . . Why then did these miserable people come to church? Why did they receive the sacrament of baptism, if afterwards they intended to return to the profanation of idols?

Caesarius, Bishop of Arles, 500 to 543. In *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* by Richard Fletcher, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 51, 52.

Questions

1. What behaviors or ideas threaten the status of new Christians as fully-fledged believers? What does it seem to mean to be a Christian in each of these contexts?
2. What are the priorities of the missionaries? How do they seem to be going about their job, from these short passages? How does the conversion seem to "work"?
3. What do you think might make these situations challenging for conversion? What do you think would be the "ideal" way to convert people who are pagans?



Professor [Lisa Clark Diller](#) (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2003) teaches on and researches the early modern world at Southern Adventist University. She and her husband Tommy live and put their faith into service in downtown Chattanooga, TN. Diller enjoys crossing cultural, geographic, and socio-economic boundaries whenever possible.

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on May 05, 2010 in [Church History](#), [Missions and Ministry](#), [Quotable](#) | [Permalink](#)
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