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### The Teacher's Notebook: Missions and the Challenge of Conversion Part I

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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May 07, 2010

## The Teacher's Notebook: Missions and the Challenge of Conversion (Part I)

by Lisa Clark Diller



Two weeks into the winter semester, I realized that in three of my courses we were spending a great deal of time asking the same question: “What does it mean to be a Christian?” Specifically, in the face of spreading the gospel to people who have never heard it before, who are not literate, and who are often in political/military conflict with the missionary culture—what beliefs and practices constitute the bare “minimum” to count as conversion?

The classes covered North and South America in the colonial periods and Europe in the medieval period. The issues were shockingly similar everywhere. We read texts by Christians who very much wanted to fulfill the gospel commission, but who were sometimes in disagreement with each other regarding how much cultural

“sensitivity” it was appropriate to have, and who had different attitudes towards the political power of the sponsoring culture. They all seemed to agree that there was growth within the faith once one became a baptized Christian, but *what should be the minimum standard for calling oneself or labeling others as “Christian?”*

We did not, of course, fully answer this question for our historical subjects. But in the process of analyzing some of the issues, tactics and assumptions that they faced and embodied, we discovered that we share many of the same concerns as they did. And that, perhaps, our own ideas about what it means to be a “good” Christian are not unproblematic or uncolored by our cultural context.

### Compromise Or Accommodation

First, we had to confront our prejudices with regards to the Christian tradition we associate with Roman Catholicism. Virtually 100% of the missionaries we studied were part of the Western/Latin Church. Especially in my class on medieval Europe, there was as constant assumption that these weren't good Christians, that they compromised too much with paganism, and that they encouraged ignorance and superstition. But it was sometimes hard to distinguish between compromising with paganism and making analogies that would help explain the gospel in a new context. For instance, when Jesuits compared the Creation story to the Pueblo people's belief regarding their origins, were they helping people become Christians or were they corrupting the truth faith?

As I thought about the implications of what we were studying, at one point I asked my Medieval History class “Who here has done mission work—gone on a short or long-term mission trip or done evangelism—in a different country?” *When those of us who had done so started talking about our experiences, we realized that we had often made accommodation for cultural differences* or for the spiritual infancy of the people we were working with—even to the point of making analogies between the gospel and popular culture or holding our worship services in places where non-believers might be more likely to congregate or feel comfortable gathering. With these comparisons in mind, we were a bit more ready to take the missionaries of the eighth and ninth centuries on their own terms, and to believe their claims that they were trying very hard to create mature Christians out of pagans.

## Scripture Or Miracles

Second, when we asked the question why would anyone who wasn't a Christian want to convert, we realized that there were some uncomfortable implications. We wanted to say that the gospel brought peace of mind and reconciliation with God. But this is a very evangelical, post-eighteenth century sort of way of looking at conversion. For people who may have felt that they had reconciled themselves with their deity and for whom peace of mind wasn't the primary issue, other things come into play.

We realized that often, even in the Bible, conversion followed miracles—a demonstration that one's God was powerful, more powerful, than the local god(s). The missionary to Ireland, Columba, often used miracles to compete with the magic of the Picts—in a similar way that Elijah used a miracle to compete with the prophets of Baal. These weren't conversions where beliefs were compelled based on the authority of Scripture—these people have no reason to think that Scripture is important or authoritative. I think this is, in many cases, why Protestantism took awhile to get going in the area of missions. Scripture, rather than ritual and tradition, form the basis for authority within Protestantism, so one has to start with people who already take Scripture seriously.

## Superior Culture

Connected to this was the realization that in all the missionary situations we studied, conversions were very unsuccessful unless the missionaries came from a culture that was considered to be materially, politically or culturally attractive/superior. Either they had proven themselves to be so by actually defeating the host society militarily, or their economic and material wealth was so evident that people were willing to listen to them. It was virtually impossible for missionaries from a poor place to make inroads into a wealthy place.

As a class, we realized that usually when we talk about the mission field, we are thinking about places that are poorer than we are. Even though we “know” the mission field is the whole world, when we use that phrase, we aren't really thinking of Sydney, Australia. One student pointed out that if she said she was going on a mission trip to Europe, she'd definitely be seen as doing something second rate compared to a mission trip to Ethiopia (even though both places are historically Christian already). What does it mean for conversions that we often have to demonstrate implicitly or explicitly that the new believers' lives will be better off in some (often material) way if they convert?

Clearly, the ambiguities for the conversion process (past and present) weighed heavily on us. But we also spent some time talking about what the missionaries themselves were like and what sort of job it was they had “signed up” for. More on that in Part II.



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 07, 2010 in Church History, Missions and Ministry | Permalink

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Lisa, this is a great post. A couple of thoughts come to mind.

Regarding Scripture and miracles, it seems that the authority of Scripture is often founded on appeal to the miraculous. Many people

say they believe the Bible because it brought about a supernatural change in their life. The scriptural example that comes to mind is the miraculous display on Sinai that established the authority of the Torah. Perhaps it is the cerebral Protestant approach to Scripture, reacting against the superstitious excesses of Catholicism, that prepared the way for a secular-materialistic enlightenment.

On the other hand, the emphasis of scripture in Protestant missions has resulted in a spread of literacy around the world, including Bible translation projects that have preserved languages through the introduction of literary culture. I think that this is a net positive effect of mission efforts.

I have two observations regarding the critique of missions coming from a superior culture. First, I'm reading through the Ellen White compilation *Evangelism* in which she talks about the need for Adventists to stop presenting their message in a way that appeals only to the lower classes. To appeal to the higher classes, she basically says that things need to be done at a higher quality, which necessarily involves more expense. In other words, is it realistic to expect people to become interested in Christ purely on altruism?

Second, it has been noted that there is a sort of classism involved in the distinction between sociology and anthropology--sociology for developed countries and anthropology for everybody else. I think an even stronger case could be made for classism in the distinction between the ministry disciplines of evangelism and missions. At their core, they're about doing the same thing, but one discipline is for ministering to us and the other for ministering to them. As the global West is becoming post-Christian and the global South increasingly Christian, I think the distinction between evangelism and missions is becoming less and less useful.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [May 07, 2010 at 02:42 PM](#)

Yes, good points David. The irony is that Adventist "mission" to developing countries succeeds far more spectacularly than does Adventist "evangelism" to industrialized, western countries. I think this is because the Adventist supernaturalistic world view is actually far more congruent with that found in developing countries. We westerners are greater aliens in our own culture than when we travel overseas. Our inability to connect with the materialistic, secular assumptions of modernity and post-modernity makes the west in many ways our toughest mission field, at least after the Muslim world.

In light of Lisa's post, what can we do to accommodate, but not compromise with, our own culture to more successfully advance our mission here at home? I think the discussion could involve a range of questions such as worship styles, church locations and formats, methods and modes of preaching, Sabbath school methods, etc. Once we decide what are those things based on scriptural principle, and what are those based on our cultural conditioning, we can modify the latter and protect the former in making our adjustments. This would mean being both "conservative" and "liberal" at the same time, in the best kind of way.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [May 08, 2010 at 05:37 PM](#)

David, I appreciate what you pointed out about the ways in which the reading of Scripture can be more than scholarly/cerebral/data-based. I've been reading Mark Noll's *The New Shape of World Christianity* while on my current travels and have been reminded of the ways that Scriptural translation has empowered local cultures to interpret/live out their Christianity in ways that were subversive of the cultural imperialism that was sometimes a temptation for the missionaries. This is a nineteenth and twentieth (and twenty-first) century phenomenon, so it was out of the scope of the classes I was teaching this past semester, but it is important to remember.

I do hope that Protestant missions didn't start spreading in the late eighteenth century because Protestant empires were starting to rule the world. But the connection between mission and feeling that one comes from a superior culture did seem to go hand in hand until the mid-twentieth century. Noll's book is reminding me that in the current era this is not the case--more missionaries are coming from the Majority World (often to the richest countries) than vice versa now.

I very much appreciate the way both you and Nick point out the collapsing distinction between mission and evangelism. And if we go further, as Nick has suggested, to collapsing the distinction between local and international mission, it may prove to be even more useful.

Posted by: [Lisa Clark Diller](#) | [May 08, 2010 at 11:10 PM](#)

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