

A Theology and Ethics of Child Conversion: Lessons for Contemporary Missions from the History of Christianity

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Putting the words “children” and “conversion” together creates a host of mixed images and reactions. On the one hand, child conversion plays a dark role in several chapters of the history of Christianity. Many children in the past and still today have been beaten, sexually abused, and even killed, all in the name of “conversion.” On the other hand, “conversion” has also been seen as a positive factor in the lives of children. Several studies of Christianity in the past and today show that young people who self-identify as Christians, testify they have been “transformed” through Christ, or participate in Christian communities are thriving. As several social scientists now claim, a robust faith life and participation in a faith community are among the significant assets that help young people avoid at risk behaviors, cope with adversity, and thrive. A strong faith life can also play a positive role in moral development, providing young people with foundational values and virtues that help guide and ground their behavior and ethical decisions.

The aim of this paper is to provide elements of a strong theology and ethics of child conversion for Christian missions today by examining positive and negative instances of the conversion of children (past and present) and by highlighting various theological understandings of “child conversion.” By reflecting seriously on these examples, the paper articulates a robust theology of child conversion and invites conference participants to rethink “mission” in ways that include children, honor their integrity, and treat them with respect.