

Editorial

Andrew Walls and Conversion

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Andrew Finlay Walls was special. He treated others with respect and kindness. His insights into spiritual realities were keen. He helped students learn and grow according to their backgrounds and needs, not in strict compliance with his own methods, expectations, or pace. Prof. Walls's scholarship was marked by painstaking, meticulous research into seemingly obscure people and events that others might overlook. His love of literature, multilingual capabilities, and wry sense of humor could lead listeners along unforeseen and imaginative adventures.

As I heard him introduced once, Prof. Walls could “see things the rest of us can't see.” Walls's recent transition into the surrounding cloud of ancestors should encourage those of us who remain toward increasingly fervent, careful, and faithful service.

Walls's hundreds of students were from all over the world and have subsequently lived and served in myriad settings. Like the many others privileged to personally observe and listen to Prof. Walls, I can recount numerous episodes that sparked personal growth, new insights, laughter, and amazement. Who else could seemingly doze off during a guest speaker's presentation and suddenly contribute a date, name, or other bit of information the invited expert could not produce? What other teacher would patiently allow a student to grapple with material without pre-empting that student's own discovery of a vital point that Prof. Walls knew all along? What other erudite academic and widely read author would genuinely listen to a young scholar struggling to articulate their own thoughts and goals?

Walls's unsettling late-1950s experience of attempting to teach Patristics to his “thoroughly disinterested” students in Sierra Leone triggered his realization of different cultural and spiritual universes people inhabit. That insight, coupled with Walls's historical instincts and training, birthed his observation of Christianity's serial spread—including the recent stupendous Christian growth in sub-Saharan Africa. The related self-realization of his own cultural heritage, particularly marked by “European Christendom,” involved turning his unconscious blindness and arrogance toward Christ for healing and fresh eyes to see the divine work taking place right under his nose. That turning informed Walls's development of his full-orbed understanding of “conversion.”

Provincial Christian experience, most especially that of Europeans who over generations came to assume that they and their civilization(s) alone were Christian and all others were not, breeds the notion that the conversion of “pagan others” involves them changing to live *in toto* like yourself and your society. As Andrew Walls experienced in West Africa and subsequently conveyed through his teaching and writing, running up against others' different lives and settings is what calls into question such an entrenched and otherwise impregnable notion about conversion, a notion he called “proselytizing.”

Among Walls's most constructive insights was that viewing conversion as an individual undergoing a total change—from pagan darkness to Christian light—is itself a culturally particular view. Walls discerned how Western Evangelicals had come to terms with the European Enlightenment and hence could only envision conversion in individual categories, unwittingly

demanding total cultural change as well. Genuine cross-cultural interaction, however, unsettles culturally particular assumptions that presume to be universally normative.

As Andrew Finlay Walls sorted out his experience, training, observations, the Bible, and the Spirit's leading, he came to see "conversion" as an ongoing turning of everything toward Christ. That conversion is for individuals and collectives, as well as for both followers of Christ and those yet to follow him. Walls understood that God's plan that invites conversion is "to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). To "disciple all nations" is to help facilitate peoples turning all they are and have toward Christ.

Walls's contemporary David Bosch explained the Christ-ward turning necessary for both Christians and others using the now well-known and intentionally ambiguous phrase, "transforming mission." Both commissioned participants in mission and recipients of mission are to be transformed. God was just as interested in the transformation, or "conversion," of Jonah and Peter as he was in the conversion of the Ninevites and Cornelius's household. Christ's witnesses, especially including cross-cultural missionaries, are to be transformed, be converted, and turn everything they are to Christ just as those who receive the good news through missionary witness.

The articles in this issue interact with Walls's framework—some more explicitly than others—through case studies, field research, and careful analysis. The articles deal with several different contexts and take various approaches. I pray that readers will allow the observations and insights of both Andrew Walls and the articles' authors to encourage transforming participation in the conversion of God's broken, beautiful world to Christ.