



Friday Feature for June 12, 2026

Remembering Robert Louis Wilken, 1936–2026

Ken Myers

This is the Friday feature for June 12th. I'm Ken Myers. Last Saturday, June 6th, church historian Robert Wilken passed away at the age of 89. Dr. Wilken was the William R. Kennan, Jr. Professor of the History of Christianity Emeritus at the University of Virginia, where he taught from 1985 until his retirement. A number of tributes and reminiscences about his life and work are published online. I had the pleasure of interviewing him in 1995 about his book *Remembering the Christian Past*. That anthology included an essay called "Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Thought." In the essay, and in a conversation I enjoyed with him shortly after the book's publication, Robert Wilken discussed how much the Church in the late 20th century had to learn from an ancient cloud of witnesses.

Robert Wilken

One of the things that was characteristic of the ancient culture religiously was its deep conviction that whatever was old and practiced by the ancestors and handed over — generation to generation — among people in a certain place, was true. Now that meant that if at one part of the world you worshiped the sun, that was *your* way of doing things. If at another part of the world you offered animals on altars and made a burnt offering, a sacrifice of that sort, then that was *your* way. In other words, the link between that which was old and that which was true was the fundamental principle that undergirded all religious life. So Christianity challenged that form of relativism.

KM

A kind of multiculturalism.

RW

It's exactly what it is, it's a multiculturalism.

One of the first challenges to Christianity — probably the most astute in the first three centuries — was by a Greek thinker by the name of Celsus. He wrote a book called *True Doctrine* or *True Teaching*. And he defended the relativity of practices on that principle. And he was challenged by Origen of Alexandria, probably the greatest Christian intellectual of the first three centuries. Origen challenged Celsus's argument by arguing that truth was one, and that if one believed in one God (and Celsus was very sympathetic to that) then there had to be some kind of standard by which everything was to be judged. And that, of course, is the situation that we find ourselves in today.

Now normally, of course, we don't deal with the hard cases, and we don't admit to ourselves — if we're making a case for multiculturalism — that many of the societies that we want to celebrate are narrow, provincial, have practices in terms of how they deal with people in their society that are quite offensive to our own; we sort of pick out the the cream, the colorful side, you know, the dances, the folk music, and this kind of thing. But the issue is really basically the same. That is whether one can speak about truth, whether one can speak about right and wrong, whether everything is going to be placed on some kind of relative standard.

So that's another similarity between our culture, namely the growing recognition that relativism in this form is a pernicious evil and has consequences for our life. Another way in which I think we can find similarities is that in the early Church, the presence of martyrs had such a powerful impact on the life of the ordinary Christian. And for the first time in really a long time, the Christian world now is beginning to realize that we've got martyrs in almost every country of this world in the 20th century. And so that the conviction that to be a Christian has consequences for one's life, for one's work, for one's family, is something that that is now beginning to dawn on our consciousness.

I'll put it this way, on a much lower level. I'd say fifteen, twenty years ago, there was still the sense in the university world that we all were part of a common Christian culture. It was very attenuated. And it was not expressed in many public ways, but there were certain assumptions that were made. Now I think what's happening is that people realize that it makes a difference whether you are willing to identify yourself as a Christian. You find that people now actually

say, well, he's a Christian or she's a Christian or this person, you know, is not. Now it's mostly said among Christians, but it's a way of identifying and distancing oneself from the society and from one's immediate peers that I find quite new. And now, the next step is not going to be martyrdom, but it does mean that people realize that they are being named in a certain way by other people.

KM

When we talked in the mid-90s, Robert Wilkins seemed to be entertaining the possibility of an increased level of persecution against Christians. Then and now, a number of Christians have shared that concern and promoted strategies to reform society and government so that martyrdom would become illegal, to make the world more believer friendly. I asked Robert Wilken if he felt a more excellent response would include the building up of believers toward faithfulness at any cost.

RW

Clearly both are necessary, but there is a kind of priority. And the priority must be to build a strong Christian community. That is: it's only in such communities that people can learn the skills — religious as well as human skills and social skills — by which it is possible to interest others, persuade others, because persuasion is not a matter of ideas, it's finally going to be a matter of life, how people live. And it's (in a way) *easy* to get religion. I think I might even say that in one of these essays. But it's quite another thing to pass it on, especially to the next generation and to your children. Because then you have to move beyond *your* rich experience, that might have been transformative of your life, and touch into somebody else's experience, which is not going to be a matter of them going through the same experience. It's like listening to a concert, or a record, and then trying to tell somebody about it. You simply can't do it. And it may be that if you then try to duplicate the concert, that the person's not going to have the same kind of reaction to it.

So in this sense, *building the community* — a strong community that senses that it's different from the larger community — is probably the first and most important challenge. And that's the one that I think probably most American

Christians have not begun really to understand. That is because we are still so much a *cultural* religion in this society.

But the other [task] — that is, to build a humane and just society — is equally important for a quite different kind of reason: that there are too many things that in the larger society still are reminiscent of Christianity. And these should not be given up. It's like thinking back to the sixties, when in the name of a more "authentic" witness, Christians tore down church buildings because they felt it was better to use the money for something else, rather than to keep up the stained glass windows or keeping the stones cleaned and this kind of thing. And then once that building is gone, there's no physical sign that reminds people of something other than, you know, that it becomes a record store or McDonald's or something . . . so that the very presence of, one might say, *empty* symbols and structures and institutions and architecture is not insignificant. These things then can be filled as long as they are still there.

KM

Now I've heard some people say that if our era is becoming more like the first century or more like the period of the early Church, that we should actually *forget* the edifices that have been constructed in the intervening period and return to a kind of immediate, wholly personalized house church sort of faith. If our age is like that of the Church in the book of Acts, then we ought to try to look like the Church in the book of Acts. What would you say to that?

RW

Well, if you start the simplest, most mundane student organization, you can probably go for maybe a month or a month and a half without electing somebody as chairman, and having a little committee that's going to make decisions when other people are not there. Human life cannot exist without institutions, without institutional life. That was one of the fundamental things that went wrong in the '60s. We thought that somehow people just could get along without these things. And then you begin to extend that. People can't exist without buildings. Because buildings are things that you grow to love. They allow you to transcend yourself. People can't exist without ideas that help them to formulate and to organize their thinking. And so within ten, fifteen years, any movement that is going to endure and is to grow and to deepen and

mature is going to have to take on institutional characteristics. So that notion of a very primitive Church — I mean, one can read the New Testament evidence quite differently. Because the book of Acts starts out with the story of filling up the number of the twelve because Judas, of course, was no longer part of the twelve and so they had to fill up the twelve. So they felt right off the bat that they had to attend to their institutional needs.

KM

And then they had to create deacons . . .

RW

Right, they had to do that for that particular task.

KM

Historian Robert Wilken, talking with me in 1995 about his book *Remembering the Christian Past*. Dr Wilken died last Saturday at the age of 89. His many other books include *The First Thousand Years: a Global History of Christianity*; *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*; *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, and *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. Robert Wilken was a frequent contributor to *First Things* magazine, and back in 2024, I recorded a reading of one of his articles as a *Friday Feature*. That article was “The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue,” and you can find it on our website by searching for his name in our guest index. In our app (if you’re a member) you can find that reading by putting Wilkens’s name — W-I-L-K-E-N — in the filter field at the top of the library page in the app.

That’s all for this week. Thanks for listening. I’m Ken Myers.