

## The Undivided Church: Myth and History

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IT IS COMMONPLACE, even among some scholars and high-ranking Church officials, to refer to the time of the undivided Church. What is usually meant is a period before 1054, when—as historical surveys often state (although no medieval text does)—the Churches of Rome and Constantinople definitively severed communion with one another. Thus, the first millennium is a golden age of unity between Eastern and Western Christians. Moreover, that period in history also has usefulness for Western Christians, interested in ecumenism and internal reform, who want to see past the medieval papacies of Gregory VII, Innocent III, and Boniface VIII to an ideal time of simple Christian structure and life in the West. If only we could return to the time of the undivided Church! This dream of the past becomes a goal for the future.

Such a mythical account of the undivided Church could be refuted by both faith and reason. For those subscribing to doctrinal truth claims, the unity of the Church is held as a distinguishing mark. The Church is always one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Therefore, a Christian reciting the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed professes, in so many words, that the Church was, is, and always will be undivided. However many opposed Christian communities there are, the Church cannot lose the gift of unity, which is derived from the unity of the Blessed Trinity. On one hand, to speak of the time of the undivided Church suggests that the Church, at some later point, lost an essential characteristic. On the other hand, a reasonable reading of early Christian history can also show how followers of Jesus were divided from the very beginning. Judas left the Last Supper early in order to betray Jesus. Acts 15 records how Christians were so divided that they disagreed on the matter of what was necessary

for salvation. Paul tells the fractious Corinthians: “there must be divisions among you” (1 Cor 11:19). Is it really, then, such a surprise that the fourth-century Epiphanius of Salamis, in his *Panarion*, takes note of eighty sects? If someone says that divisions in the first millennium were rather marginal and not as significant as what happened in the second millennium of Christianity, one wonders if such a person really understands Jerome’s phrase after the heretical Council of Ariminum: “The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian” (359). Does such a person appreciate how the phenomenon called Arianism (in its sundry forms) continued far past the Council of Constantinople I (381) to cover many lands of North Africa and Southern Europe for centuries? One wonders if such a person finds it insignificant that the Churches that did not accept the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451)—namely, the opposed ancient Church of the East and Oriental Churches—stretched from Ethiopia and Egypt over to China. The first thousand years of Christianity are far from fitting the pat description of the undivided Church.

To begin chapter 4 of his book entitled *The First Thousand Years*, Robert Louis Wilken writes,

It is tempting to romanticize the early Church and imagine a golden age of peace and harmony. In truth there was never a time, even in the first decades, that Christians had no differences. Because Christian faith holds that certain things are true (there is one God, creator of all that exists), controversy over what is to be believed as well as how the faith was to be practiced was present from the beginning. (37)

As one of North America’s foremost scholars of early Christianity, Wilken knows more than a thing or two about history, and more than a thing or two about Christian faith and practice. His book of thirty-six brief chapters between the Introduction and an Afterword tells the amazing stories of Christianity’s growth and decline across a wide range of cultures on three continents, with Islam’s rise in the seventh century playing no small role in the diminishment, if not complete disappearance, of the Christian faith in several countries. Wilken’s history stops at the year 1000, less than one century before the ill-famed crusades began; it is a history steeped in early Christian facts more interesting than modern myths.

While many will rightly extol Wilken’s achievements as a master storyteller of diversity and will stress the great differences within early

Christianity, in reaction to the popular vision of early Christian peace and harmony, I want to concentrate in considering aspects of unity found in Wilken's telling of Christianity's first thousand years. After all, there is no diversity without a prior unity. One can "celebrate diversity" between apples and oranges, as both are fruit. But there is no celebration of diversity between apples and University of Virginia Wahoos. You need a common ground, something undivided, before any legitimate diversity is intelligible. The following engages in Wilken's narrative through seven underlying unities that he, in so many words, identifies to support the global diversity of early Christianity: time, creed, intellectual creativity, sacramental practices, bishops, monasticism, and the rulers of the temporal state. Surely, other aspects of Christianity's unity could be chosen, but there is warrant from this book to engage in discussion of these common features across the many lands, cultures, and peoples of the first Christian millennium.

We begin with time. Wilken frequently gives insights into what Christianity is: "Christianity is a culture-forming religion" (2), "Christianity is transcultural and migratory" (4), "Christianity is inescapably social" (190, 358), "Christianity is a form of wisdom" (231), "Christianity is an affair of things" (303, cf. 45), "Christianity is an eastern religion" (359). Such sentences are more than writing in a vivid historical present about what Christianity was. They tell us, in Wilken's sage commentary, what Christianity *is*. By narrating the various twists and turns of a thousand years of global diversity, Wilken provides a useful introduction to what Christianity is really all about. As such, he suggests a form of Christian unity that spans the ages to readers today. For example, if readers disagree with Wilken that "Christianity is an eastern religion," then one can ask if the first thousand years of Christianity really were formative for what this religion is today or not. Wilken knows that some will disagree with him. He closes his study with this counsel: "Jerusalem welcomed people from both East and West, and if one keeps the holy city in mind, the global history of Christianity will not be forgotten" (359). This can make one think of the Psalmist's prayer: "If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither" (Ps 137:5). The first underlying unity is that one can find a singular Christianity of the first thousand years; and moreover, that Christianity continues in the third millennium. And yet, this unity, like all the others, has a fragility that could be ignored or denied in the withering of history. Not every form of Christian community perdured to today, or will endure tomorrow.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

(Mk 8:29), and he expected a response. With Simon Peter, Christians are united by faith in Jesus Christ. Because Christianity is creedal, brief statements of faith, such as the Apostles' Creed or the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, inform how Christians read the Scriptures, understand their traditions, motivate their worship, and contemplate their end. One cannot write a long historical account of communities that rejects the basics in the rule of faith, as such communities gradually disappeared. Wilken writes, "The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople ensured that Christianity's distinctive understanding of God would become a permanent and enduring part of Christian tradition" (98).

Wilken also says, "From the beginning of the fourth century through the middle of the sixth century, more than 250 councils dealt with a wide range of topics" (90). By no means are all those councils counted as "orthodox" today. The sheer magnitude of councils gives some indication of the intellectual creativity undergirding the articulation of the Faith in solemn doctrinal form. It is no accident that some of the most brilliant contributors to civilization were Christians who thought deeply about the mysteries of the Faith as told in the Scriptures—people like Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine. The Christian faith gets people to think, and to think widely, about the meaning of the world, its Creator, human life, and happiness. A unifying aspect of Christianity is precisely that freedom to pursue the truth.

Wilken knows that sacramental practice holds a very high authority in uniting Christians—and in dividing them. When he considers the divisions found in the second century, such disagreements as whether Christ's body was real or whether Christians ought to follow the Mosaic Law, Wilken writes, "But there were other controversies, and none more far-reaching and divisive than fixing the date on which the death and resurrection of Christ would be celebrated" (37). That division presupposes the unity of an annual Christian liturgical celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Christians, very early on, established their own calendar, marking Sunday as their weekly feast of the Resurrection and, later, also setting a time aside each year for that celebration. Moreover, the rhythm of celebrating such sacraments as Baptism (only once in a person's life) and Eucharist (at least weekly, if not daily) united Christians in a way that marked them out from the world and united them to Jesus Christ in his saving mysteries.

Beyond creeds, theologies, and sacramental liturgies, we can find institutions that make even more concrete the unity of the Christian faith. Wilken writes,

In much writing on the early history of Christianity theological ideas play a major role, especially in accounts of the great controversies over the doctrine of the Trinity and the person of Christ. That is right and good. But institutions were vitally important, and the three that figure large were the office of the bishop, monasticism, and kingship (or imperial rule). (2)

These three will now be considered singly.

Going back to the beginning of the second century, Wilken alludes to this line from Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Smyrnaeans: "Where the bishop appears, there let the multitude be; just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (cf. 356). Wilken calls Ignatius "prophetic," and states, "There is no evidence for enduring Christian communities without the office of the bishop. Even in distant lands, when a king adopted the faith, one of the first actions was to send for bishops from more established regions" (357). As Ignatius noted, bishops are necessary for Christian unity.

An idea propagated *in nuce* by the likes of Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus, and developed in modern surveys of early Christianity, has done a disservice to another aspect of unity in early Christianity. It is the story of "from martyr to monk." As this history goes, Anthony of Egypt, Martin of Tours, and many others could not be martyrs, and so they settled for the monastic life, and thus the "white martyrdom" came into existence. This narrative makes the ascetic life a sort of secondary thought after "the age of martyrs." Yet the history and the theology of asceticism are much deeper than that. Wilken aptly notes, "Christianity had an ascetic strain from the beginning" (99). Besides noting New Testament sources, Wilken adduces the second-century Greek physician and philosopher Galen as a witness to Christian men and women who never cohabited and who practiced self-control in matters of eating and drinking. He even states that monks were "no less important" than bishops in early Christianity (357).

Finally, Christianity has always had a special relationship with temporal rulers. The First Letter to Timothy says, "First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity" (1 Tim 2:1-2). Wilken knows that there were no Christian emperors or kings in the first three hundred years. "Unlike Islam," Wilken writes, "Christianity began as a community distinct from the body politic" (357). The conversion of kings undoubtedly aided the

spread of Christianity in several parts of the world. Yet, when rulers did come into the Christian faith, and the Church and society were one in their realms, “the Church retained its distinctive identity” (357).

Throughout his magisterial book, Wilken rightly emphasizes the diversity of Christian change through time and space: “[E]ach interaction with a new people and language brought changes in how Christians practiced their faith.” Yet, it must be known that Wilken does not stop there. He continues, “At the same time, Christian rituals such as baptism and the Eucharist, the Bible, the Nicene Creed, the office of bishop, and monasticism bound Christians in a spiritual unity that transcended the deep cultural differences” (4). We owe Robert Louis Wilken a great debt for this book. Wilken’s exciting story of early Christianity’s diversity in its global history rests upon a spiritual unity. This approach provides an antidote to the unhealthy scholarship that so stresses fragmentation among Christian communities that no universality can be discerned. Moreover, for those wanting to extol the unity of Christianity’s first millennium, he gives a remarkable history more potent for ecumenism and internal reform today than the myth of the time of the undivided Church. **N&V**