



The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God

Robert L. Wilken

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God

Robert L. Wilken

The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God Robert L. Wilken

In this eloquent introduction to early Christian thought, eminent religious historian Robert Louis Wilken examines the tradition that such figures as St. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and others set in place. These early thinkers constructed a new intellectual and spiritual world, Wilken shows, and they can still be heard as living voices in the modern world. In chapters on topics including early Christian worship, Christian poetry and the spiritual life, the Trinity, Christ, the Bible, and icons, Wilken shows that the energy and vitality of early Christianity arose from within the life of the Church. While early Christian thinkers drew on the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of the ancient world, it was the versatile vocabulary of the Bible that loosened their tongues and minds and allowed them to construct the world anew, intellectually and spiritually. These thinkers were not seeking to invent a world of ideas, Wilken shows, but rather to win the hearts of men and women and to change their lives.

Early Christian thinkers set in place a foundation that has endured. Their writings are an irreplaceable inheritance, and Wilken shows that they can still be heard as living voices within contemporary culture.

The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God Details

Date : Published March 11th 2005 by Yale University Press (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780300105988

Author : Robert L. Wilken

Format : Paperback 398 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, History, Church, Church History, Christianity, Nonfiction

 [Download The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Fa ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God
Robert L. Wilken**

From Reader Review The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God for online ebook

Kameron says

Excellent summary of early Christian thought and practice. Wilken draws from a range of early church Fathers primarily through letters, sermons and treatises to give us a sense of how they understood Scripture, the Sacraments, society, icons, spiritual life, poetry, and other topics. Intellectually stimulating yet also quite practical and devotional.

Scott says

Excellent view into how the early Christians thought about God a life. With a special focus on some of the key early church fathers, life Coram Deo is the clear emphasis.

Jstrick says

Wilken's work is a superb introduction to the spirituality of the early church. His expertise in the field is unparalleled and his passion for the Fathers exudes from every page. This work will kindle a desire in you to read widely and deeply the writings of the early church. And while Wilken's Catholicism does seem to pervade some of his thinking and writing here, it does not overshadow the work nor undermine its overall value.

Sarah says

This was a book which I had to read for an early theology class in Divinity School. It was far and away my favorite book for that semester.

Wilkin presents an incredible amount of information about the church fathers in the relatively short book, but in such a way that it all is relevant and interesting. This would be a book to anyone interested not only in the early church but in early philosophy.

Jonathan says

Wilken's aim—to “depict the pattern of Christian thinking as it took shape in the formative centuries of the church's history”—was soundly achieved, and his central argument, that “Christians reasoned from . . . history, from ritual, and from text,” was thoroughly and even eloquently demonstrated (xiv, xvii). Several features emerge as important to Wilken's successful presentation. First, the essential characteristics of early Christian thought that Wilken proposes at the beginning recur over and over again throughout each chapter.

Yet these characteristics recur naturally, giving the reader assurance that Wilken is not forcing his ideas on the data, but that these ideas emerged from the data. One clear example of this is the “omnipresence of the Bible” (xvii), which Wilken had promised at the outset: nearly every page of his book has some reference to, if not a quotation of, Scripture. Second, Wilken draws from the writings of the early Christians themselves to walk his readers through their thought processes. For example, when he discusses how the early Christians would allegorize Scripture, he gives several examples of how Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory the Great did just that (69-79). Even for readers who disagree with an allegorical hermeneutic, Wilken’s primary source examples render such allegorizing to be understandable, if not compelling. Third, Wilken seems to have really captured the spirit, not just the ideas, of the early Christians. What he says about the work of Gregory the Great is also true of Wilken’s own work: “He did not construct a world of ideas for others to admire, but one to live in” (313). Thus, while well-researched and accurate, the book is also unavoidably devotional, pulsating with the love for Christ that saturated the hearts and minds of these Christian forerunners.

Readers looking for a critique of early Christian doctrinal thought (especially from a Protestant perspective) will not find it here. While Wilken comments unfavorably on the way in which some Christians handled debates (concerning the debates about Christ’s nature he writes, “it is not an edifying history,” 112), he makes no attempt to evaluate Biblically, for example, whether the veneration of icons is right or wrong (237-261), or whether the allegorizing is a legitimate method of Biblical hermeneutics (69-77). Reviewer A. M. C. Casiday notes that Wilken bypasses the topics of monasticism and the offices of the church, but those omissions certainly can be attributed to Wilken’s primary aim of capturing the spirit of early Christian thought, not so much the structures in which this thought developed.

Conclusion

Because Wilken’s book has so effectively captured the spirit of early Christian thought, students can expect it to be foundational in orienting their future studies of this period of church history. Despite its uncritical reporting of areas in which the early Christians deviated from Scripture, students can also expect it to be an ongoing source of spiritual refreshment and inspiration. Besides these benefits, Wilken has offered tantalizing glimpses of these heroes of the faith, enticing his readers to journey back to those first centuries and make their personal acquaintance.

Teri Pardue says

I have not done much reading in patristics, other than Augustine’s Confessions, and I found this book a perfect introduction.

It managed to cover a large amount of material (and church fathers) in a fairly short book, seeming to take a magnifying glass to specific events or people when most necessary. I learned a lot and wrote down a lot that I wanted to delve into more deeply. The chapter on early Christian poetry was one of my favorites.

“The words of the Scripture made a temple deep within the hearing of early Christian preachers. Not only in sermons but also in theological works, in letters, and in spiritual writings the church fathers display an enviable verbal command of large sections of the Bible. In contrast to modern theological writings in which the Bible is cited in support of theological ideas, and hence usually relegated to the footnotes, in the early church the words of the Bible were the linguistic skeleton for the exposition of ideas. Even in the writings of the most philosophical of early Christian thinkers their thoughts are expressed in the language of the Bible, seldom above it. The liturgy provided a kind of grammar of Christian speech, a key to how the words of the Bible are to be used” (p. 43).

This book really made me want to delve further into the works of the fathers of the early church. It showcases their beauty and theological depth. I love these words on patience from Tertullian:

“Patience outfits faith, guides peace, assists love, equips humility, waits for penitence, seals confession, keeps the flesh in check, preserves the spirit, bridles the tongue, restrains the hands, tramples temptation underfoot, removes what causes us to stumble, brings martyrdom to perfection; it lightens the care of the poor, teaches moderation to the rich, lifts the burdens of the sick, delights the believer, welcomes the unbeliever, commends the servant to his master and his master to God, adorns the women and gives grace to men; patience is loved in children, praised in youth, admired in the elderly. It is beautiful in either sex and at every age of life...Her countenance is tranquil and peaceful, her brow serene...Patience sits on the throne of the most gentle and peaceful Spirit...For where God is there is his progeny, patience. When God’s Spirit descends patience is always at his side.”

Dale Larson says

I don't recall where I heard this book recommended but, upon getting, I was a little nervous that it might be dreadfully boring. Much to my relief this book was neither dry history or bland theology (though it was comprised mostly of those two topics). It was obvious that the author has been, personally, formed by the teachings of the early church and his passion for the subject comes through in a very enjoyable way. Thus, in terms of style and presentation I was very pleased.

Content-wise, the book covers the development of a number of Christian beliefs and, specifically, how they came in to being a world of Roman politics, Greek philosophy, and pagan religion. As well, overarching the whole book, is a focus on the fact that, for Christians, thought (ideas, philosophies, etc) are not an end to themselves but a means to "seeing the face of God". Wilken does a great job of communicating the passion of early Christian thinkers who went beyond being mere philosophers and allowed the truth that they found to transform themselves.

David says

Super grateful for Wilken's work and accessible description of Early Christian Thought. This book does a wonderful job of helping one understand not just the belief or thinking of the Early Church but how that thinking got developed over the first few centuries. For example, the church's concept of ethics or virtue, shaped within the worldview of earlier influences like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, but equally a departure and uniqueness based on scripture and the teachings of Jesus. That chapter was fabulous.

Wilken walks the reader through various large themes throughout the book and weaves in various church fathers, classic thinkers, cultural context in multiple centuries to paint a holistic understanding of Christian thought. In the process, he demonstrates the foundational role these church leaders played in Christianity, Christian thought, and the cultures they emerged in.

If your concept of Christian thought is solely based on modern theologians or churches, or even merely the reformation do yourself a favour and spend some time with Wilken to broaden your scope. I'll be picking up another one of his works as soon as I can.

Bob says

This book is fabulous, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this. The author, Robert Wilken, considers the history of theology as it developed in the early church, & its relationship with thinkers of Judaism, Greece & Rome, Wilkin warns us though not to be overly preoccupied with intellectual ideas. The Gospel, after all, does not intend to make us smart, but to transform our hearts, minds, & our very lives.

Early Christianity appealed to history, reason, ritual, experience, & most of all to the Scriptures, all with the goal of authentic faith expressing itself in true love. What we seek is not barren knowledge but the very face of God (Psalm 105:4). In his panoramic survey Wilkin describes how we know God in worship, the sacraments & the Scriptures; he talks about the Trinity, the nature of Christ, & creation; the relationship of faith to reason & the church to broader society; poetry & icons; & then the nature of Christian virtue & the spiritual life. From start to finish the book is a feast of the early Christian fathers.

Wilken offers a vivid portrait of Christian intellectual tradition & how it took shape in the first few centuries of the church's history. He gives us a flavor of the richness & vitality of Christian imagination during this formative period, again founded chiefly upon Christ & the Scriptures. These biblical & theological foundations made Christian thought distinctive by anchoring it firmly on history (Christ), text (Bible) and ritual (worship). The author consistently argues that the goal of early Christian thought was never just knowledge or understanding for its own sake, but changed lives & love for God & men.

This book is profitable & a joy to read.

Jeff Miller says

Totally enjoyed this book which focuses on the intellectual life of the Church and the development of Christian thought. This is topic focused and so the early fathers are revisited all throughout the book, especially St. Augustine. It is obvious that the book was intended for a wide audience beyond just Catholics and does a very good job in presenting this. Despite being a Philistine when it comes to poetry I enjoyed the chapter that dealt with the development of poetry in the life of the Church.

I listened to the audiobook version and no doubt I will revisit it in the future.

Wilken is a convert from Lutheranism into the Catholic Church.

Steve says

Robert Louis Wilkin's *The Spirit of Christian Thought* is one of the best, most informative books I've read this year. Wilkin provides a fascinating account of Christianity's early centuries, one that encompasses great historical figures, such as Augustine, Origen, Basil, and Maximus the Confessor, but also topics such as the Trinity, early Christian poetry, Icons (and the battle over them), the importance of Scripture, and the necessity of a Christian community (a people of God). In particular, I enjoyed the Wilkin's overview of Augustine, and his emphasis on the Saint's great book *The City of God* and what it had to say about community (the book was written at a time of great turmoil in the Roman Empire). Another discussion worth flagging as a great read is the one on Icons, and how they point to the Incarnation – Christ. (If you don't

understand Icons, or know nothing of their history, this book is a great place to start.) Overall, Wilkins stresses the very physicality of Christianity, which harks back to 1 John 1:1-9 (“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...”), and keeps it as a running thread throughout most of the book. However, the last fifty pages or so, things do get a bit abstract, with an extended discussion of the Cardinal Virtues and the influence of Neoplatonists on the Church. Wilkin’s portrays this absorption as a good thing. Me? I was reminded in these last pages of a few poetic lines by Geoffrey Hill:

The commonplace hands once
Thick with Plato’s blood
(Tasteless! Tasteless!) are laid
Dryly against the robes.

(from “The Humanist”)

Scott says

Very fine intro to patristic thought.

John David says

Anyone who has ever tried to dip their toes into the waters of medieval theology can quickly be overwhelmed by its complexities and occasional rank obscurantism. Wilken, much to his credit, knows his subjects so well that he can distill their most important ideas in historical context (especially important as this book covers a period where much of the known world begins as Roman and pagan and ends several centuries later, when both the Empire and its paganism were gone) and explain how they were important in the development of Christian intellectual history – all while remaining extraordinarily accessible for the reader with no formal knowledge of patristic theology.

At the heart of the book are two major messages. First, to separate evidence and sensory knowledge from pure faith – very much a temptation for those of us who have been born since the Enlightenment – would have made no sense to the early Church fathers. From the time of Origen and Tertullian, earthly evidence and divine faith were both seen as necessary, and even to feed into one another. Thinking is part of believing, and vice versa. Second, the series of practices that we recognize as early Christianity are undoubtedly social and communal in nature. Wilken stresses over and over again that even the monks would lived in desert confinement for decade after decade, still saw Christianity, at its root, as love for fellow man and community.

The thinkers that he covers are all very important, and range in time from its first couple of centuries to approximately the eighth century, covering the entire harvest of early Christian thought. The most important among them include Justin Martyr, Origen, Clement (and Cyril) of Alexandria, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor – and perhaps the greatest mind the Church has ever known, Saint Augustine. To assist the reader who has minimal familiarity with this rich history of thought, Wilken arranges his discussions topically, with chapter names drawn from an appropriate epigram which opens each chapter. “Founded on the Cross of Christ” discusses how we come to know God, “An Awesome and Unbloody Sacrifice” references worship and the sacraments, and “Seek His

Face Always” picks up Trinitarian themes (Trinitarian discussions, as fundamental as they were to early Christology, are not relegated to this one chapter alone). For me, the most fascinating chapters were on a couple of the first Christian poets, and another on importance of the Bible and how the shape and texture of its writing so differed from Greek and Roman literature that it profoundly refigured the ideas of the early fathers.

While the author covers a wide range of topics that are often considered dry, the overall effect of the book comes across as the passionate history of a fascination with the people Wilken writes about. His vim and vigor for the fathers of the early Church is clear and unmistakable, so much so that the historical figures he presents almost seem whitewashed – pure and almost superhuman. His orthodoxy perhaps results in a lack of thorough criticism on some points where it would have been welcome. However, if you’re looking for critical responses to the fathers, these should not be difficult to find. However, as pure contemporary apology for a centuries-old intellectual tradition, this book stands above many others I have read.

Coyle says

"Evangelical Christians tend not to be familiar with the Early Church. While there are many reasons for this (not least as a result of the “no creed but the Bible” movements of the 19th century—see Nathan Hatch for more on that), there are many more reasons we should seek to correct this lack in our spiritual lives. If you have been meaning to do just that (and you should be), *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* by Robert Louis Wilken is unfortunately not the place to start.

....

With all of that said, I still would not recommend this book to the reader just beginning his exploration of the Early Church. As well-written and engaging (and certainly learned) as *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* is, Wilken is far too generous with his definition of “Early” for this to be anything but confusing to the beginning reader.

Alongside his discussions of Augustine, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria (all writing prior to the 450s AD), Wilken includes summaries of and reflections on the following theologians:

Gregory the Great (~540-604AD)

Maximus the Confessor (580-662AD)

John of Damascus (~675-749AD)

Theodore of Studium (759-826AD)

If we close one eye and squint with the other, we can maybe, sort-of, a little bit, include the 6th century figure of Gregory in the “Early Church.” But remember, by that point we’re roughly six centuries from the time of the Apostles—and calling that “Early” is a stretch. Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus and Theodore of Studium are 7th, 8th and 9th century figures, and so belong in the Medieval world of a Charlemagne or a Chaucer far more than they do in the Classical world of a Caesar or a Constantine."

Read the rest here: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/schaeffe...>

Charles says

This book is not a polemic or a book of apologetics; it is instead an exposition of what early Church theologians thought about important topics in Christian belief, and how those thoughts evolved and grew. If you think all theology is merely empty wind or arguments about angels dancing on the head of a pin, this is not the book for you. But if you want to know how early Christians developed their thought about the Trinity, or theological views on Christ being simultaneously fully human and fully divine, or how they

viewed faith through the prism of reason, this is the book for you.

Don't plan on finishing this book in an evening. It's not too long, and it's surprisingly readable, but it benefits from careful reading and consideration—I'm sure it benefits from multiple readings, as well. Moreover, given how it's divided into clear topics, it is easy to return to the book when considering a specific topic, whether that is Christian views on the Trinity, the resurrection of the body, or the role, origin and logic of faith in Christian belief.

While it is not intended as such, this book is also a rebuke and response to the currently fashionable New Atheist set of such imagined luminaries as Dawkins and Harris (as well as other similarly shallow thinkers on the topic such as Gibbon). A key premise, always unexamined, of the New Atheists is that Christian thought is an oxymoron, and that they have discovered this key fact as a revelation missed by all prior opponents of Christianity. "The Spirit Of Early Christian Thought" shows in detail what anyone who is not ignorant already knows, that Christian thought and reasoning has absorbed the finest minds of the West for two millennia, and from the very beginning Christian thinkers actively grappled with and definitively responded to critics (Celsus, the Emperor Julian, Porphyry) who wrote in the same vein but with infinitely more intelligence and insight than the New Atheists, who are, in any reasonable view, a bunch of supercilious clowns. In fact, Wilken wrote a prior book on the topic of the arguments of early opponents of Christianity, to which this book was initially supposed to be a type of sequel/response, but which instead developed into an independent examination of Christian thought.

The conflict between the New Atheists and Christians is not an abstract philosophical argument—it, or the issues under discussion, have very real consequences. All Western morality is premised on Christian thought and principles. And it is a very different moral code than that of non-Christian societies, since it is a pure myth that the Golden Rule has any core relevance to any religion but Christianity. The New Atheists believe that without God societies can still retain a moral core—Steven Pinker actually argues that morality is merely the outcome of people finding positive-sum games. Maybe. But more likely, as Wilken says, "Augustine's 'City of God' defends a fundamental truth about human beings and about society. Only God can give ultimate purpose to our deepest convictions, for example, the dignity of the human person, and provide grounds for communal life that transcend self-interest." An abstract core belief in human dignity (real dignity, not Anthony Kennedy "dignity") seems an unlikely automatic outcome of positive-sum games. Human history suggests the opposite. But we'll find out within the next fifty years or so.

In any case, apologetics or calling out silly people is not Wilken's goal in this book, and he does neither. Rather, the core of the book, the reason for its existence, is "Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about our world and history." When talking about this thinking, Wilken focuses on Origen; Gregory of Nyssa; Augustine; and Maximus the Confessor. These are all pre-medieval, or at least pre-High Medieval, thinkers—while later theologians, like St. Thomas Aquinas, are occasionally mentioned, the focus is on *early* Christian thought. That said, some readers may expect "early" to be first century, and that is not the case here, if for no other reason than that detailed theological exposition of most Christian topics took centuries to accomplish.

Aside from the specific topics, Wilken maintains two threads throughout the book. The first is the importance of Biblical exegesis to all these thinkers. The Bible, Old and New Testament, suffused all their analyses, even the most complex. This is in contrast to the popular Protestant view that before Martin Luther, the Bible was ignored. And this Biblical analysis was extremely focused and subtle, using both comparisons of different passages from the Bible and sophisticated reasoning, which is in contrast to the modern tendency to view each personal analysis, even of the uneducated and stupid, as equal, and to view purely literal interpretations as somehow superior. As Wilken notes, "the church fathers took it as self-evident that the words of the Bible often had multiple meanings and the plain sense did not exhaust their meaning."

The second thread is that the Hellenization of early Christianity has been grossly overstated. In its simplest

and crudest form, the idea is that the Judaic Christianity of Christ and the Apostles was hijacked by Saint Paul and his Neoplatonist progeny. Wilken doesn't like this idea. Instead, he emphasizes the concrete roots of all early Christian thought in the Scriptures; informed sometimes, to be sure, by Greco-Roman philosophical ideas, but those ideas flavored rather than supplanted the Scriptures and traditions of the Apostles.

I personally found the discussions of the Trinity and the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ the most interesting. The Trinity absorbed many early thinkers, who first fit Jesus into the Trinity and later fleshed out the Spirit (though the Trinity itself was always accepted as a core Christian doctrine and mystery), relying primarily on Biblical exegesis rather than deductive reasoning—or, as Gregory of Nyssa said, “his aim is to ‘fit together’ what he learns from the Scripture with ‘conceptions that are drawn from arguments based on reason.’” This includes gems like Tertullian’s analogy of the social nature of the Trinity to the back-and-forth that occurs inside any human’s head while thinking.

Similarly, the early Christians struggled with the apparent paradox of simultaneous divinity and humanity (i.e., the hypostatic union). They saw clearly how this was essentially impossible to fully grasp and how ridiculous it seemed to non-Christians, and they addressed such objections head-on, when they weren't contending among themselves on the issue. (For those keeping score at home, the mainstream Christian position that was converged on over the centuries is that in Christ there are two natures and two wills; each retaining its own properties, and together united in perfect harmony in one substance and in one single person).

As to faith itself, Wilken explains how Christians have always viewed faith not as some required unreasoned belief—quite the contrary. Outsiders, non-Christians or the non-religious, view religious faith as an inverse invincible ignorance. Wilken notes that Christian faith has been a key point of attack by non-Christians from the very beginning, citing Galen and Celsus, through many later thinkers. But Wilken carefully shows how Christians, from earliest times, have instead viewed faith as a combination of recognition of the testimony of reliable people who had come before, reasoning, and concrete evidence.

Wilken’s core point is that any historical (as opposed to mathematical) knowledge involves a type of faith, as Augustine said, and quotes Augustine: “Nothing would remain stable in human society if we determined to believe only what can be held with absolute certainty.” The existence of witnesses (the original meaning of “martyr”), reason, evidence, and authority (in the sense Augustine used the Latin “auctoritas,” as a person able to guarantee the validity of a legal document or action), allow Christians to conclude that their faith is not blind. Once you read this section of Wilken’s book, anybody who uses the Flying Spaghetti Monster (which lacks all four markers of Christian faith) as a counter-Christian argument will, if he thinks clearly, be duly ashamed and put that argument aside with his Hot Wheels.

That said, Wilken also acknowledges that faith is not at all a matter of pure reason, as the Manichees would have it. He has a long discussion of the role of hope and love in faith, again quoting Augustine, “If you have faith without hope and without love, you believe that he is the Christ, but you don't believe in Christ.” And he concludes, “But in matters of religion the way to truth is not found in keeping one’s distance. It is only in loving surrender that we are able to enter the mystery of God. In the words of Richard of Saint Victor, the twelfth-century theologian and spiritual writer, ‘Where there is love, there is seeing.’ By putting itself in service of truth, faith enables reason to exercise its power in realms to which it would otherwise have no access. It is only in giving that we receive, only in loving that we are loved, only in obeying that we know.” And, of course, this is the core of Christianity. The Trinity is important but abstract to most believers’ lives. But faith itself is not, and Wilken’s book ties the entire Christian project together.
