

Contra Wilken

by

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This essay is written in response to an article written by Pastor Todd Wilken (Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) entitled, *That Man Might Become God*, in which he attempts to elaborate for his reading audience the Eastern Orthodox Church’s teaching about theosis – the deification of mankind. As Todd Wilken correctly states in the opening paragraphs of his essay, it is not the latest mega-church sensation that is making these promises. The Church that makes these promises is none other than the Church that has a historically and dogmatically direct and continuous link with the Church that began at the Pentecost event – THE One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church. Remember, we are talking about the Church that officially canonized the texts of the Old and New Testament in the fourth century, battled heresy and affirmed the dogmatic teachings concerning the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ over the course of seven ecumenical councils, preached the Gospel from India to Spain and from Germany to Africa. In addition, this same Church elaborated an understanding of theological anthropology, the Fall of mankind, and what exactly salvation “is” centuries before Martin Luther and the Reformation.

In my careful reading of Todd Wilken’s article, I came to the sudden realization that in his critique of theosis, he fails his readers by telling only part of the theological story. Here is an analogy. Imagine that you wanted to learn about the history and battles of World War II. You go to the local bookstore and pick up the best book available on the subject. However, rather than starting at chapter one and reading the entire book, you immediately jump to the last chapter in which the American forces drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Based on this reading, and with only part of the story, you immediately assume that this war only involved the United States and Japan, that the US was the aggressor in the war, and that they won by pummeling the defenseless Japanese with atomic weapons. Your conclusions in this instance would be correct because you missed the first chapters of the book that discuss the rise of Adolph Hitler, the Axis, the war in Europe, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. However, you would miss the whole and correct understanding of America’s involvement in this war. Similarly, by immediately jumping to

the Orthodox theology of theosis and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and in the Church, Todd Wilken does an injustice to his reading audience by trying to relate only the “last part” of the story. You see, there is no Holy Spirit, no life in the Trinity, and no theosis unless there is first Christ crucified. Article # 7 of the Agreed Statement of the 9th Plenary of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission which met 31 July - 8 August 1998 in Sigtuna/Sweden states:

Lutherans and Orthodox affirm that on the cross Christ the incarnate Word, through whom God reconciled us to Himself (cf. II Cor. 5:18-19), died for our sins (cf. I Cor. 15:3) and freed us for a new life by His resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:5) so that having crucified the passions of the flesh we may live in the freedom of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:24-25).

So, in the Orthodox “solar system,” our “center of gravity” is the Son – crucified and resurrected!

In Todd Wilken’s mistaken assessment of the 6th century addition of the filioque clause to the 4th century Nicene Creed, he forgets the one important thing that is the foundation of Orthodoxy’s rejection of the filioque – Holy Scripture! The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, in its original form in 381 A.D., does in fact state, “I believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father....” There is no filioque clause that states, “I believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” Why? And what is so wrong with the filioque? The answer is simple - **It is contrary to the very words of Jesus found in the Bible!** In John 15:26 (RSV), Jesus states, “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, **who proceeds** (*ekporevetai* in Greek) **from the Father**, he will bear witness to me....” The Holy Spirit does not proceed from both the Father and the Son. He proceeds from the Father alone. That is the testimony of Scripture. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and, as the verse quoted above states, is **sent** by the Son. This theology is completely scriptural and therefore absolutely central to the dogmas of the Orthodox Church. There can be no other understanding of this aspect of the Holy Spirit since this and all Orthodox theology is based in Scripture and never contradicts it!

Pastor Wilken is absolutely incorrect when he states, “[a]cceptance of the filioque would be a tacit admission that Jesus Christ is THE definitive revelation of who the Triune God is.” Acceptance of the filioque would, in fact, be the acceptance of a dogmatic formulation that is contrary to the witness of Scripture. If blind acceptance of a theological

innovation such as the filioque is to be accepted by the Church universal without question then why was there a Reformation? If “everybody’s doin’ it” then why not accept papal authority, indulgences, merits of the saints, purgatory, celibate clergy, and the other teachings that found their way into the medieval Roman Catholic Church? Oh yeah, because some of that stuff is contradictory to the message of the Bible - just like the filioque.

In the next section labeled “Orthodoxy 101: The Theology of Theosis,” Todd Wilken makes an absolutely incorrect statement about Orthodoxy’s so-called center of gravity. It is the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures, that reveals absolutely everything to us – including the Holy Trinity. It is here that I refer back to my analogy about the WWII history book, for it is in this section of his article that Todd Wilken displays a lack of sound theological methodology by taking his audience directly to the end of the story. His definitions of theosis are correct. In fact, he correctly quoted some good sources. However, he takes his interview with Orthodox priest, Fr. John Matusiak, out of context and casts it in the light that we Orthodox have no “clear doctrine of justification.” Since the Christian East did not go through a period of scholasticism as did the West after the Great Schism in 1054, the Orthodox Church tends to not have elaborate treatises on single terms found in scripture like “justification.” Hence, Fr. Matusiak’s quote which tells us that salvation / justification / atonement / redemption are all a part of an integrated process of reconciliation of God and man through Jesus Christ. The terms are all part of an interlocking and organic whole. In *The Orthodox Faith: Doctrine* which is available online, along with the other 3 catechetical books on the Orthodox faith, at www.oca.org, Fr. Thomas Hopko states:

The sufferings and death of Christ in obedience to the Father reveals the super-abundant divine love of God for his creation. For when all was sinful, cursed, and dead, Christ became sin, a curse, and dead for us -- though he himself never ceased to be the righteousness and blessedness and life of God Himself. It is to this depth, of which lower and more base cannot be discovered or imagined, that Christ has humiliated himself "for us men and for our salvation." For being God, he became man; and being man, he became a slave; and being a slave, he became dead and not only dead, but dead on a cross. From this deepest degradation of God flows the eternal exaltation of man. This is the pivotal doctrine of the Orthodox Christian faith, expressed over and over again in many ways throughout the history of the Orthodox Church. It is the doctrine of the *atonement* -- for we are made to be "at one" with God. It is the doctrine of **redemption** -- for we are redeemed, i.e., "bought with a price," the great price of the blood of God (*Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 6:20*).

In the same section of this book, Fr. Hopko elaborates the scriptural teachings that Jesus Christ alone is the 1) perfect image of human life, 2) the reconciler of man with God, and 3)

the destroyer of death. A little while later in this book, Fr. Hopko briefly mentions theosis by saying:

The new commandment of Christian life is "to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt 5:48*). It is to love as Christ himself has loved. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (*Jn 15:12*). Men cannot live the Christian life of divine love in imitation of God's perfection without the grace of the Holy Spirit. With the power of God, however, what is impossible to men becomes possible. "For with God all things are possible." (*Mk 10:27*)

The Christian life is the life of God accomplished in men by the Spirit of Christ. Men can live as Christ has lived, doing the things that he did and becoming sons of God in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, once more, the Christian life is a Trinitarian life.

By the Holy Spirit given by God through Christ, men can share the life, the love, the truth, the freedom, the goodness, the holiness, the wisdom, the knowledge of God Himself. It is this conviction and experience which has caused the development in the Orthodox Church of the affirmation of the fact that the essence of Christianity is "the acquisition of the Holy Spirit" and the "deification" of man by the grace of God, the so-called **theosis**.

The saints of the Church are unanimous in their claim that Christian life is the participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity in the most genuine and realistic way. It is the life of men becoming divine. In the smallest aspects of everyday life Christians are called to live the life of God the Father, which is communicated to them by Christ, the Son of God, and made possible for them by the Holy Spirit who lives and acts within them.

Thus, Jesus is our Lord and God and Savior. Through Him and Him alone do we receive justification, atonement, righteousness, grace, salvation, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. One of those gifts, begun in this life and continuing on into the next is theosis.

In the next section, entitled "Pre-Fall Perfection or Pre-Fall Potential?" Todd Wilken does a fairly decent job of presenting the Orthodox view of the fall of mankind. Further discussion of this concept would require more time and space than this little essay allows. However, it is important to note that what Todd Wilken is correctly elaborating for his readers is the nearly universal teaching of the Church Fathers from Irenaeus to modern times.¹ To base one's theological anthropology on St. Augustine, and a maybe a few other bishops such as Cyprian and Ambrose, separate from and outside the context of the Christian East and other Western theologians such as Irenaeus, gives a very limited view of how the Church has interpreted the Fall of mankind throughout history. If the Western Church and the Reformers claim that man was created perfect before the Fall, then why did the Fall happen? How could perfect human beings in perfect communion with God succumb to the

¹ It is important to note that Irenaeus was a Western bishop. For an outstanding look into his theological anthropology, developed in the second century A.D. read John Behr's *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 2000.

temptation of the serpent? There is also the argument that if “perfection” fell once then what prevents “perfection” from falling again? If that is so, then those who adhere to this theological anthropology may find themselves stuck in 5th and 6th century Origenism’s cycles of fall and redemption.²

Overall, the historical Church does not have a theology of the “total depravity” of man post-fall. The majority of the Church Fathers do, in fact, describe the fall of man as his descent into a corruptible, but not totally depraved, state of being. The witness of the Old Testament affirms this in that God immediately began the process of fixing what was broken once Adam and Eve fell. As we Orthodox pray in the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great:

You did not forever reject Your creature whom You made, O Good One, nor did You forget the work of Your hands, but because of Your tender compassion, You visited him in various ways: You sent forth prophets; You performed mighty works by Your saints who in every generation have pleased You. You spoke to us by the mouth of Your servants the prophets, announcing to us the salvation which was to come; You gave us the law to help us; You appointed angels as guardians. And when the fullness of time had come, You spoke to us through Your Son Himself...

To conclude this discussion, I must add two more “simple” things: Enoch and Elijah. If humanity was so far fallen and so utterly depraved, then why did God take these Old Testament figures into heaven bodily (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5, and 2 Kings 2:11)?

The next section in Todd Wilken’s treatise is headed: “I’m trying to free your mind, Neo.” Yes, in fact, the Orthodox do have a notion of apophatic theology. Scripture itself states, “No one has seen God at any time...” (I John 4:12) and again “No one has ever seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” (John 1:18) God in His essence is completely unknowable. Jesus Christ comes not to reveal the divine essence of God, but to reveal his love and his salvific action (John 3:16-17). There is ultimately no theology until we can answer the question that Jesus put forth to the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15) From there we can start doing theology. We do not start from theosis and work our way backwards.

In the section titled, “Both/And Theology,” Todd Wilken demonstrates where his understanding of Western and Eastern Christianity in his mind do not “connect.” If justification and sanctification are not components of theosis, then what are they?

² Fr. Oliver Herbel, Orthodox Church in America, personal communication.

Using Todd Wilken's definitions, we have to ask for ourselves, "If I am justified and sanctified, then what?" If, according to St. Paul, sanctification is connected with the fact that we become a temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 3:16) and conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) then aren't we already on our way to theosis – becoming by grace what God is by nature? This concept of theosis, in reality, is not entirely alien to Lutherans. Article # 6 of the Agreed Statement of the 9th Plenary of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission which met 31 July - 8 August 1998 in Sigtuna/Sweden states:

Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm that salvation is real participation by grace in the nature of God as St. Peter writes: "that we may be partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 1:4) That happens through our participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord in His body, in Whom all the fullness of God dwells (cf. Col. 2:9). This is the way in which salvation is realized as purification, illumination and glorification, also referred to as deification (theosis). This terminology has not been central in Lutheran tradition. Lutherans prefer to speak of the sanctification in the body of Christ who is Himself present in the faith of the believers. Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm the reality of the believers' participation in the divine life, in which they grow by the grace of God.

Theosis is not a result of the Christian East's errant theology; it is the natural result of a life in Christ. Rather, the Protestant lack of understanding of and the fear of theosis is ultimately due to a poor understanding of what sanctification is for those who are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Finally, Todd Wilken asks, "Does Orthodoxy need a Reformation?" We Orthodox would answer: absolutely not! To honor Martin Luther, we Orthodox must admit that he rightly reacted against the errant doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church such as indulgences, etc. The Reformation of Luther was, in the eyes of some, an attempt to return the Church back to "Orthodoxy." Unfortunately, by missing the "organic whole" of Christian teaching and doctrine that developed during the fifteen centuries before Martin Luther, and by the over-emphasis of Augustinian and related theologies, the Reformers "threw out the baby with the bathwater." The ultimate failure of Luther's movement is that his followers adhere to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as interpreted by Martin Luther and his disciples, not the Gospel of Jesus Christ as interpreted by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church (both East and West) over a period of nearly fifteen centuries. Martin Luther's teaching of justification by faith *alone* and comparisons with the Eastern Orthodox teachings on the same subject is too vast of a project to undertake here. On behalf of the Orthodox, though, the following brief text is offered:

Justification is a word used in the Scriptures to mean that in Christ we are forgiven and actually made righteous in our living. Justification is not a once-for-all, instantaneous pronouncement guaranteeing

eternal salvation, no matter how wickedly a person may live from that point on. Neither is it merely a legal declaration that an unrighteous person is righteous. Rather, justification is a living, dynamic, day-to-day reality for the one who follows Christ. The Christian actively pursues a righteous life in the grace and power of God granted to all who are believing Him.³

Absolutely, we are justified by faith apart from the works of the Mosaic law of the Old Testament since that law has been surpassed by the Law of grace and truth in Jesus Christ. However, pay attention to the way the text of Romans is laid out. After St. Paul's long exhortation to faith and how that alone justifies us, he then, in Romans 6 takes us into his understanding of baptism. Then, in Chapter 8, St. Paul tells us of the new life in the Spirit and in chapters that follow, he then explains what he expects from those who walk in this newness of life (re: Chs. 12-15). There is a theme here in Romans, also in Acts, and in other apostolic writings of apostolic preaching → faith → baptism → life in the Spirit and works of righteousness. Don't forget, St. James reminds us that "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:14-26). The works themselves don't get us into heaven, but righteous works are expected (Matthew 25:31-46) of all the justified and sanctified believers.

Theosis is not some kind of "new age divination" teaching in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It is the natural progression of our human lives as Christoforos Stavropoulos states:

[t]he work of the Incarnate Word once again opens the way for us human beings to the achievement of theosis, which is the ultimate purpose for our life. The divine incarnation brings us again to the Father and presents us with the potential of realizing the likeness of God in our lives. Incarnation-crucifixion-resurrection-ascension bridge the gap which separates us from God. That chasm is death, sin, and fallen nature. The chasm which our fallen nature creates is bridged over by the incarnation of the Divine Word. The chasm which is created by our sin is bridged over by his crucifixion. And the third chasm, death, is filled in by his resurrection. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). And with his holy ascension, Christ unites the earth with the heavens and unites the two into one; he has made both into one (Eph. 2:14). (...) Our call remains only one: theosis through our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.⁴

Theosis has as its "chief cornerstone" the witness of Scripture. In the Old Testament, when Moses came down from the mountain, from his experience with God, put a veil over his face because he was aglow from the very presence of God. (Exodus 34:29-35). At the Transfiguration of Christ, the very light of divinity showed forth from Jesus and pointed forward to his glorious resurrection and, ultimately to our resurrection, when we too will

³ *What Orthodox Christians Believe*. (Ben Lomand, CA: Conciliar Press), 1988. Pg. 7.

⁴ Christoforos Stavropoulos, "Partakers of Divine Nature," in *Easter Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, 2nd edition. Daniel B. Clendenin, Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 2003. Pgs. 187-188.

shine by grace with the light that God is by nature. To deny the concept of theosis is to deny the witness of scripture. If that isn't good enough, then hear what St. Paul has to say:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:12-18).

Now, let us return to the beginning of Todd Wilken's article and address those five bullet listed items that begin his article. 1) Do you ever wonder if God created you for a greater destiny? No, I have no need to wonder because Scripture answers that question for me. God promises a greater destiny for those who believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. I can be justified by my faith in Christ, enter into the waters of baptism and be cleansed of original sin, become dead to sin and made alive in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:11), made a temple of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11 and I Corinthians 3:16), and then, one day, resurrected to life eternal in a new and glorious body (I Corinthians 15:35-58). 2) Do you long for a real relationship with God? Yes, and I get that through Jesus Christ. The prophets of old promised it (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 11:19-20) and Jesus Christ fulfilled it not only reconciling man to God (Epistle to the Romans; Epistle to the Hebrews), but the *kosmos* itself (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). 3) Do you want to get in touch with God's divine energy? Energy in Greek is *energeia*. It means activity or power. The word occurs several times in the Greek text of the New Testament though, unfortunately, is it not translated directly as "energy." Nonetheless, St. Paul became a minister by it (Ephesians 3:7, Colossians 1:28-29), it knits the body of Christ [the church] together so it grows and edifies itself in love (Ephesians 4:16), it will transform our lowly bodies to be conformed to Christ's glorious body (Philippians 4:20-21), and it raised me with Christ from the waters of baptism (Colossians 2:12). 4) Are you ready to experience God personally? I did, in baptism (John 3:5-6), I do, in the Eucharist (I Cor. 10:16) and the sacramental life of the Church (I John 1:3), and I will at the resurrection from the dead (I John 3:2). You can start living up to your potential today! By God's ever-abundant grace, I am living up to my potential in Christ, Pastor Todd, and I invite you to do so, too!