

Eastern Orthodox Conciliarity Reflects the Holy Trinity

The Council of Jerusalem as described in the fifteenth chapter of Acts is the prototype for dealing with errors arising in the Church. The question at hand was this: Must gentile converts to Christianity first become Jews? Must they submit to circumcision and keep the Jewish dietary laws? The Council decided that this was not necessary and St. James, who presided over the Council, concluded with phrases like “It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord” and “it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”[1] The Council produced a letter to be sent to the churches which delineated their conclusions, based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which resulted in the consensus of the council members. This is the pattern that was followed by the Ecumenical Councils as well.

The Roman Catholic Church makes the claim that St. Peter was the first infallible Pope [2] but in this example, we see that he provided evidence but was not the president of the council and did not have the final say: St. James had this role. Yet St. James did not take upon himself the autocratic right to make the final decision; but “it seemed good to us” and “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit.” Conciliar consensus, based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the heart of Orthodoxy’s synodal method of responding to heresy.

Ecumenical councils were never called to promulgate new doctrines but were called in response to heretical ideas that were being taught in the Church. The fathers of the councils sought to answer the following question: What has the Church always believed? What has she always taught? What has she always confessed? [3] In short, what is the teaching of the Apostles who learned their doctrine directly from Christ, had their memories refreshed by the Holy Spirit [4] and “traditioned” these teachings to their successors? This was accomplished by searching the Scriptures, consulting the church fathers and above all, by prayer. There is not a human head of the Church, the head is Christ Himself [5] and He is not willing that she should fall into error and cooperates synergistically with the Church in protecting her teachings. Councils operate on the assumption that the Holy Spirit is present at the proceedings and will bring the participants to the knowledge of the truth.

Orthodox conciliarity reflects the nature of the Holy Trinity, which exists as a “council,” so to speak, of persons. We do not worship a lone *tawhid* as do the Muslims but rather a Trinity of persons who dwell together in love [6] and unity. This can be reflected “on earth as it is in heaven” by means of conciliarity where bishops meet in love and in unity.

The Roman model of a supreme pontiff places all authority into the hands of one person, although the Roman Church does call councils from time to time. This does not reflect the conciliar nature of the Trinity, however, and is more “Allah-like” in its approach. This has allowed the Pope to promulgate erroneous dogmas, such as *Ineffabilis Deus* issued by Pius IX in

1854 concerning the immaculate conception of Mary. [7] This is not a doctrine that has been “believed, taught and confessed” from the time of the Apostles.

Conciliarity does present some difficulties. In the third chapter of *The Nicene Faith* titled “Councils and Controversies: A Historical Overview,” numerous councils are called by rival factions with each party exiling members of the opposing party and then calling the exiles back and then repeating the process all over again. Which of these can be considered genuine councils and which ones truly heard the voice of the Holy Spirit? Often, a subsequent council will affirm a previous council as in the case of the Council of Chalcedon affirming the local Synod of Gangra held in 340 which condemned Manichaeism.[8]

Another problem is the difficulty of making quick decisions. An infallible Pope can act in haste but it is more time consuming to assemble a council of bishops. However, it seems that the Orthodox Church has not needed to make any decisions of a universal nature since the Seventh Council condemning iconoclasm.

[1] KJV Acts 15: 25, 28

[2] <http://www.catholicfaithandreason.org/papal-infallibility.html>

[3] http://www.theopedia.com/Jaroslav_Pelikan

[4] John 14:26.

[5] Ephesians 5:23

[6] <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Soteriology>

[7] <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm>

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synod_of_Gangra