

The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Johanine and Pauline Theologies

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Introduction:

The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the most fundamental belief of the Orthodox Faith. In his treatise, "*On the Holy Spirit*," St Basil explained that the Church's Trinitarian doctrine derives from, "the Scriptures" and "from the unwritten tradition of the Fathers" (42). This essay will focus on the former source, especially as Trinitarian doctrine is revealed in the divinely inspired works of St. John the Evangelist and the God-breathed Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).

I. Johanine Trinitarian Theology:

In the Epistles of St John the Evangelist, Johanine Trinitarian doctrine exists in its infancy yet belief in the Trinity is certainly evident. For example, in John's *First Epistle*, Jesus is called the "Word of life" who "was with the Father and was manifested to us" (1 Jn. 1:1-2). This refers to the Son's existence with the Father before the foundation of the world. John states that he wrote his epistle so that we "may have communion [Gr. *koinonia*]... with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1:3). John elaborates on the equality of the Father and the Son stating, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father (2:23). A specific Johanine Trinitarian reference comes in the third chapter when he states, "And this is [God's] commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ... he who keeps His commandments abides in Him... and by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us" (3:23-24). Thus belief in the name of the Son is declared and reception of the Spirit is required. In the fourth chapter of St. John's *First Epistle*, he explains how one comes to know the Holy Spirit, stating, "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God... " (4:2).

Again, in the same chapter, St John explicitly mentions the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, "By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit and we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (1 Jn. 4:13-15). St John concludes his first epistle with a profound, Trinitarian confession of faith, stating, "And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth... for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son" (5:6, 9-11).

Vladimir Lossky states succinctly the importance of St. John the Evangelist's Gospel, "The chief source of our knowledge of the Trinity is... the Prologue of St John, and that is why the author of these amazing texts has received, in the Orthodox tradition the name of St John the Theologian" (*Orthodox Theology*, 36). St John begins his Gospel in a manner similar to the Book of Genesis. But rather than beginning with creation, St John begins with that which is before creation: the Holy Trinity. Whereas creation has a beginning (Gen 1:1) God, in fact, exists before

all creation (Jn. 1:1-3, cf. Lossky, *ibid*, 59). As Lossky explains, "From the first verse of the Prologue [of the *Gospel According St John*], the Father is called God, Christ is called the Word - and the Word, in this beginning which is here not temporal but ontological, is at once God ["the Word was God"] and other than the Father ["and the Word was with God"] (*ibid*, 36). The three affirmations of St John's prologue, (viz., 1. "In the beginning was the Word, 2. "and the Word was with God," and "the Word was God), Lossky states, "constitute the germ of all Trinitarian theology... directing our thought to the obligation of affirming, at the same time, the identity and diversity of God" (*ibid*, 36).

Continuing in the first chapter is a reference to the Baptism of Christ which serves as a Theophany of the Holy Trinity. This is described through the witness of St. John the Baptist who states, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God" (Jn 1:32-34). Here the Holy Forerunner John sees the Spirit descending like a dove and remaining upon the Son, and hears the voice of God the Father from heaven. Thus the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are manifested and born witness to.

Other Trinitarian examples in St John's Gospel include in the third chapter where the Lord states that one must be "born of water and the Spirit" in order to "enter the kingdom of God" (3:5). This is not only a reference to the regenerative effect of Holy Baptism but also of the role of the third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit in our salvation. Afterwards, Jesus explains that He is the "Son of Man" who has "come down from heaven" and who "is in heaven." This statement points to the Son's omnipresence. While this text is considered a copyist's gloss by some modern scholars, it was present in the texts of many Church Fathers, like St Augustine in the fourth century.

St John explains that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son..." (3:16). This points not only to the filial relationship between the Father and the Son but also to the fact that the Son is not "made" but rather "begotten" of the Father. This manifests they are one in nature (*homo-ousios*). Finally all three persons of the Holy Trinity are mentioned in a single passage, "For He [i.e., the Son] whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure" (3:34). In other words the Son is sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit to do the Father's will for our salvation.

In the fifth chapter, after healing the paralytic Jesus compares His work to that of His Father (Jn 5:17). The Jews clearly recognize this as a claim of equality with God and accuse Jesus of this. Jesus does not back away from His statement but rather elaborates on it, finally stating, "All should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" and further claiming that, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (5:23). Further claims of equality between Jesus and His Father abound: "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do" (19), "the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does" (20), "as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will" (21), "the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son" (22), "he who hears [Jesus'] word and believes in Him who sent [Him] has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." (24), "as the Father has life in

Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself" (26), and "all who are in the graves will hear [Jesus'] voice and come forth those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (25:8-29). Such passages are logical only if the Father and Son are one in nature.

In the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus states, "My Father is greater than I" (v. 28). Jesus says this because His Father is the "*mone-arche*" (Gr. for "single source") and fountain-head of the Holy Trinity (cf. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 46). The Son is begotten of the Father from all eternity (Jn 1:1-3), as He states: "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again I leave the world and go to the Father" (16:27). This "leaving" foretells the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter (Gr. *Parakletos*), that He may abide with you forever... (14:16)." The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father as Jesus clearly declares, "But when the Comforter comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me (Jn 15:26). Thus it is the Orthodox teaching that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, the *mone-arche* (Gr.) or single, personal source of the Holy Trinity. After His resurrection, in John's Gospel, Jesus appears to His disciples and again makes reference to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. He tells them, "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you..." and then He states, "Receive the Holy Spirit..." (20:21-23).

II. Pauline Trinitarian Theology:

St. Paul's Epistles represent a significant portion of the New Testament and in them Trinitarian theology is clearly evident. For example, in one of Paul's earliest writings, the *Epistle to the Galatians*, he writes, "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4:6-7). Here St Paul makes reference to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity in their economic manifestation to the world. God, as the source of the Holy Trinity, sends forth the Spirit who proceeds from the Father. St Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of His Son" because, as stated in the Gospel of John, the Son also sends the Holy Spirit from the Father (Jn. 16:7). St Paul teaches in this passage that each of the persons of the Holy Trinity work in us for our transformation and salvation, something that would make little sense if they were not one in nature and equal in divinity.

In St Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, he first makes reference to the Trinity in the context of the charismatic gifts. Paul writes, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all (1 Cor 12:4-6). Here not only are the three Divine Persons mentioned but also that "God works in all in all." This means that all Christian gifts, ministries and activities are rooted in the Holy Trinity. Regarding the end of the world and the consummation of all things St Paul writes, "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power... Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-28). This statement that the Son will be subject to God the Father points to an important facet of Orthodox Trinitarian theology. God the Father is the single-source of the Holy Trinity. In this sense, even though the Son and Spirit have perfect equality with the Father, because they take their origin from Him,

they can be said to be "subject" to Him. But this does not make the Father more divine than the Son or the Spirit, any more than a human Father is more human than his son.

Next in Paul's *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, he states, "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:16-18). Here St Paul differentiates between the Spirit and the Lord (who presumably is the Son). Thus the two divine persons are mentioned together, yet differentiated from one another. Paul closes his *Second Epistle* with the grandest of Trinitarian doxologies, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen" (2 Cor 13:14). This is something, again, which would be unintelligible without belief in the Holy Trinity.

In Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* he writes, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle... concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:1-4). Here Jesus' human nature is affirmed but He is also called "God's Son" and "Lord" which attest to His divinity which He shares with the Father and the Spirit. The Lord's Incarnation, death and resurrection, transpire according to the Holy Spirit. Later in *Romans* Paul writes of Christ's divinity stating that it is the Israelites "from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God" (Rom 9:5). While attesting to Christ's human lineage, Paul again affirms His divinity.

Paul's later Captivity Epistles also contain Trinitarian references. Paul writes in *Philippians* of Christ's *kenosis* or self-emptying to become incarnate for our salvation. He states that Christ, "Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:6-7). In his *Epistle to the Colossians*, the great Apostle makes even greater reference to Christ being one in nature or *homo-ousios* with the Father, stating: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth... all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist... for it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell" (Col 1:15-19). Paul later emphasizes this last point, clearly stating about Christ, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the divinity bodily" (Col 2:9). Thus, according to St Paul, Christ is the perfect Image (or *Icon*) of the Father. He is the Creator of all and all the fullness of divinity dwells in Him bodily.

In Paul's *Epistle to the Ephesians*, he states a Trinitarian maxim, "Through [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:17-18). He then writes, "I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man... that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (cf. Eph 3:14-19). Again, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned in a single breath by the great Apostle because they are equally divine and equally the source of man's salvation. Finally in the same epistle, St Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph 4:4-6). The "Spirit" is the Holy Spirit, the "Lord" is our

Lord Jesus Christ, and the "one God and Father of all" is the single-source of the Most Holy Trinity.

III. Conclusion:

Thus both St John the Evangelist and St Paul the Apostle, clearly attest to belief in the Holy Trinity. Their witness, along with those of the other New Testament writers, forms the bedrock foundation of the Church's Trinitarian faith. The witness of the Apostolic, oral Tradition, combined with the Church's authority to safeguard the truth, coalesce to give us an assurance of this divinely revealed truth.