

Article: JAI003

THE TRINITY: A CASE STUDY IN IMPLICIT TRUTH

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 1 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Jehovah's Witnesses are famous for their denial of the Trinity. The Watchtower Society advises them to assert: "What I believe is only what the Bible teaches. Have you ever seen the word 'Trinity' in the Bible?"¹ If the word is not in the Bible, they reason, the doctrine cannot be biblical. Christians respond that although the word is not found in the Bible, the concept is taught *implicitly* within its pages.

This debate raises some important hermeneutical issues: What is implicit truth? Is it just as true as explicit truth? Does it go beyond Scripture to infer implicit truth from Scripture? What hermeneutical parameters govern our interpretation of implicit truth from the Bible?

Let's first define our terms. *Explicit* refers to that which is "fully and clearly expressed; leaving nothing implied"; *implicit*, by contrast, refers to that which is "implied or understood though not directly expressed."² Explicit truth from the Bible, then, refers to truth that is fully and clearly expressed in the Bible. An example of this is the truth that *God created the heavens and the earth* (as explicitly stated in Genesis 1:1). Implicit truth from the Bible, by contrast, refers to truth that is *implied* in the Bible. An example of this is the truth that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are a Trinity—three persons in one Godhead. I will use the doctrine of the Trinity as a means of demonstrating five hermeneutical principles that guide us in deriving legitimate implicit truths from the Bible.

Implicit truth must be built on the foundation of explicit truth. For doctrinal studies, serious students of the Bible collect bits of scriptural evidence from throughout the entire Bible. They *compare, classify, and correlate these bits of evidence, and then draw theological inferences from them.* The doctrine of the Trinity emerges from following such a procedure.

The doctrine of the Trinity, an *implicit* truth, is built on *explicit* truths found in the Old and New Testaments:

1. *There is only one God.* This is the consistent emphasis of Scripture (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6; John 5:44; 1 Cor. 8:4; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19).
2. *The Father is God.* The Father is explicitly called "God" throughout Scripture (John 6:27; Rom. 1:7; Gal. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:2).
3. *Jesus is God.* Jesus is explicitly called "God" (Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8), and He (Jesus) claimed to be "the first and the last" (Rev. 1:17), the precise name God used of Himself in Isaiah 44:6. The divine names "Yahweh" and "Elohim" are used in reference to the Messiah who is Jesus (Isa. 9:6; 40:3; cf. John 8:58 and Exod. 3:14). He performs works that only God can do, such as creating the universe (Col. 1:16; cf. Isa. 44:24).
4. *The Holy Spirit is God.* The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of God" (Gen. 1:2; Exod. 31:3; Ezek. 11:24; Rom. 8:9, 14; 1 John 4:2) and possesses the attributes of deity, including omnipresence (Ps. 139:7-9), omniscience (1 Cor. 2:10-11), and eternity (Heb. 9:14). He does things that only God can do, such as participating in the creation of the universe (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30), begetting Christ in Mary's womb (Luke 1:35), resurrecting Christ (Rom. 8:11), and inspiring Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

From these explicit truths we can infer the implicit truth that within the unity of the one God are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But how are we to understand this? Are the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit *modes of manifestation* of the one God, or are they *distinct persons* within the Godhead? These questions point to the importance of the next principle:

Implicit truth must not contradict any explicit truths—or other legitimate implicit truths—found in the Bible. We encounter two further truths in Scripture that set definite limits on our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity:

5. *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are persons.* The Bible does not explicitly identify them as persons, but it is reasonable to infer that they are persons based on explicit affirmations in Scripture. The Father engages in personal relations (John 3:35), and has the attributes of personality: intellect (Matt. 6:8), emotions (Gen. 6:6; Ps. 86:15), and will (Matt. 12:50). The Son engages in personal relations (John 11:41–42), and has the attributes of personality: intellect (John 2:24–25), emotions (Matt. 9:36; John 11:35), and will (Luke 22:42). The Holy Spirit engages in personal relations (Acts 8:29), and has the attributes of personality: intellect (Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 2:10–11), emotions (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30), and will (1 Cor. 12:11). The personality of each of the three is therefore implied in Scripture.
6. *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct from each other.* The Father and the Son *know* each other (Matt. 11:27), *love* each other (John 3:35), and *speak* to each other (John 11:41–42). The Holy Spirit *descended on* Jesus at His baptism (Luke 3:22), is called *another* comforter (John 14:16), was *sent* by the Father and Jesus (John 15:26), and seeks to glorify Jesus (John 16:13–14).

In keeping with the methodology enunciated earlier—*compare, classify, and correlate various bits of evidence, and then draw theological inferences from them*—we conclude that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who together comprise the one God, are distinct persons and not modes of manifestation. To come to any other conclusion would necessitate contradicting one or more explicit or implicit truths found in the Bible. This brings us to the next principle:

Implicit truth is legitimate to the extent that it accurately embraces and explains all the relevant biblical facts. Were we to ignore the doctrinal truth regarding the distinct personhood of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we would end up with the false doctrine of *modalism*. Were we to ignore the doctrinal truth regarding God’s oneness, we would end up with the false doctrine of *tritheism*. I therefore cannot overstate the importance of giving consideration to *all* that Scripture teaches on this issue: there is one God; the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God; and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are persons who are distinct from each other. Since the implicit doctrine of the Trinity explains *all* the relevant scriptural facts, it is just as legitimate a doctrine as those explicitly stated in Scripture.

Implicit truth must be congruent with accurate interpretation of biblical texts. Consider Matthew 28:19 as an example. After Jesus resurrected from the dead, He instructed the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (NASB). The word *name* is singular in the Greek, thereby indicating God’s oneness. Notice, however, the definite articles in front of each person: *the* Father, *the* Son, and *the* Holy Spirit. Greek scholar Daniel B. Wallace tells us that the definite article is often used to stress the identity of an individual.³ Theologian Robert L. Reymond thus observes:

Jesus does not say, (1) “into the names [plural] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” or what is its virtual equivalent, (2) “into the name of the Father, and into the name of the Son, and into the name of the Holy Spirit,” as if we had to deal with three separate Beings. Nor does He say, (3) “into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” (omitting the three recurring articles), as if “the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” might be taken as merely three designations of a single person. What He does say is this: (4) “in the name [singular] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” first asserting the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of the single Name, and then throwing into emphasis the distinctness of each by introducing them in turn with the repeated article.⁴ (Insert added.)

Implicit truth should be able to withstand objections. It is sometimes objected that Jesus is a lesser deity than the Father, and hence the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be true. Jehovah’s Witnesses typically point

to verses that they think negate Christ's absolute deity (e.g., John 14:28; 1 Cor. 11:3; Col. 1:15). In each case, however, they have either based their view on a radically biased and gravely defective translation of Scripture (the New World Translation) or have practiced *eisegesis*, that is, they impose their own predetermined meaning onto these verses.

Jehovah's Witnesses also try to argue that the Trinity ("three in one") is illogical. Christians may respond that the Trinity may be *beyond* reason, but it is not *against* reason. The Trinity does not entail three Gods in one God, or three persons in one person. Such claims would be illogical. There is nothing contradictory, however, in affirming three *persons* in one *God*.

That these and other objections to the Trinity can be answered reasonably is a testimony to the legitimacy of this implicit doctrine. In his book *The Forgotten Trinity*, James R. White asks, "If I believe everything the Bible says about topic X and use a term not found in the Bible to describe the full teaching of Scripture on that point, am I not being more truthful to the Word than someone who limits themselves to only biblical terms, but rejects some aspect of God's revelation?"⁵ This is an important question—one that the Jehovah's Witnesses would do well to ponder.

— Ron Rhodes

NOTES

1. *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 426.
2. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. "explicit," "implicit."
3. Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 94.
4. Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1990), 84.
5. James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis, Bethany, 1998), 29.