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Don't Fall for the Jehovah's Witnesses False Trinity Arguments

By Freddy Davis

There have been a couple of times when I have received a phone call out of the blue from a Jehovah's Witness where they immediately became extremely aggressive and tried to assert that the biblical understanding of the Trinity is false. There are probably not many of them who use the telephone this way, but those who do get specific training on how to argue this topic. As a result, they firmly believe they understand the biblical concept of Trinity – even though they really don't – and can get quite aggressive in their argumentation.

It is important to understand, at this point, that Jehovah's Witnesses hold to a unitarian theology and, thus, don't believe in the Trinity. They assert that Jesus is not God, but was, rather, God the Father's first creation (Michael the Archangel who became Jesus at his incarnation).

While , Jehovah's Witnesses officially believe that salvation is a free gift from God based on his undeserved kindness (grace/mercy) through faith in Jesus Christ's ransom sacrifice, they also believe that doing various works are evidence of that salvation. In a practical sense, however, theirs is a kind of works-based salvation in that various works are considered required for one to remain in a saved state. It is a "faith + works" approach to salvation in that faith must be demonstrated by obedience and endurance. If you don't do the works, you are obviously not saved.

The particular works that they believe are necessary include:

- Exercise faith in Jesus' ransom.
- Repent of sins.
- Undergo baptism as one of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Gain accurate knowledge of Bible truths (as taught by the organization).
- Live in harmony with God's standards (do the proper works).
- Be part of God's organization (the Witnesses).
- Endure faithfully to the end.

Of course, witnessing to non-believers is a part of the mix. While they are generally taught to be kind and respectful, many are not and can become very aggressive and even disrespectful at times.

The person who accosted me was trying to turn our conversation into a competition, and was determined to "win" no matter what it took. His tactic was to forcefully assert his position, not allow me to reply, then take my "lack of response" as a sign that I could not answer his taunts. Hopefully, you will not meet one who acts this way, but if you do you should not let it be something that bothers you. That is their problem, not yours.

As for the arguments themselves, it seems this person was trying to use very theologically technical language in a way that would frustrate the person he was talking to. Normally I do not deal with technical theological arguments in our newsletter articles. We generally focus in a different direction. However, as this is actually an argument that some Jehovah's Witnesses use, it is not impossible that you also might have to deal with this sometime when you have an encounter with them. For that reason, I am going to share this with you here.

The truth is, most Jehovah's Witnesses who confront others using the topic of the Trinity, broach the subject with the less complex argument. They will typically simply use the argument that the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. But those who go the more technical route will proceed to make a distinction between the "economic" and "ontological" Trinity. They believe that by diving into these rather technical and theological arguments, they can trip people up. They recognize that most people have never even heard of this. Keep in mind, they don't believe in either of these trinitarian concepts. They just use the arguments as a way to get the upper hand.

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What is the Ontological and Economic Trinity?

The distinction between the economic and ontological Trinity is actually one of the most important concepts in Christian theology. It helps explain both who God is eternally and how He acts in human history.

The Ontological Trinity

The ontological Trinity refers to God's eternal being and nature in Himself, apart from creation. The word "ontological" comes from the Greek and means "being" or "essence." This doctrine teaches that:

- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all fully and equally God.
- They share the same divine essence or nature.
- None is greater or lesser in deity.
- Their relationship exists eternally, before creation and apart from the world.

The ontological Trinity answers the question, "Who is God eternally?" This concept is expressed as the members of the Trinity having equality of essence, eternal relationships, and are one divine being in three persons. Scripture that backs up this concept include:

- John 1:1 - "the Word was God"
- Matthew 28:19 - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are named together
- John 10:30 - "I and the Father are one"

The Economic Trinity

The economic Trinity refers to the way the three persons of the Trinity work in creation, redemption, and history. The word "economic" comes from a Greek word meaning "administration" or "arrangement." In the economy of salvation:

- The Father sends the Son.
- The Son becomes incarnate and accomplishes redemption.
- The Holy Spirit applies redemption to believers.

The economic Trinity answers the question: "How does God act toward the world?" What is important for Christians to understand is that these "economic" (administrative) roles involve functional distinctions as God interacts with the material world. As a result, while the biblical understanding of

the Trinity is that there is one God (one being) who exists as three persons [something that can only exist in eternity], when interacting in a non-eternal environment (this world) He has to act and communicate His actions in ways that human beings can grasp (That is: the eternal [ontological] concept of God makes no sense in a temporal world where one God in three persons is impossible). Thus:

- The Son submits to the Father during the incarnation.
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father to carry out the work of sanctification and empowerment.

Examples of this concept in Scripture include:

- John 6:38 - the Son comes to do the Father's will
- John 14:26 - the Father sends the Spirit
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 - different operations are attributed to Father, Son, and Spirit

The Relationship Between the Two

Christian theology traditionally teaches that the economic Trinity (God's work in the world) reveals the ontological Trinity (God's existence in eternity). That is, what God does in history reflects who He is eternally.

For example:

- The eternal Son becomes incarnate in time.
- The Spirit acts eternally, and is also sent into the world.

At this point, it is important to think about how the economic actions of God mirror His eternal inner life. That is, does the fact that the work of Christ is limited in this world because of the limitations of a temporal created environment, mean that God in His eternalness is actually limited? And the answer is, "Of course not."

Traditional Christian doctrine says that functional subordination (Christ being obedient to the Father) in the economic Trinity does not mean inferiority in the ontological (eternal) Trinity. That is, the Son obeying the Father in the redemption process while doing his work on earth, does not mean the Son is less

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:
info@marketfaith.org
Phone: 850-383-9756

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divine. As a summary statement, both are necessary:

- The ontological Trinity protects the full deity and equality of the persons of the Godhead.
- The economic Trinity explains the different works of Father, Son, and Spirit in salvation history.

Unitarian Beliefs in History

The Jehovah's Witnesses are not the first group to latch on to Unitarian theology. In fact, the Christian church had to deal with this way back in the 4th century. Arias, a priest and founder of Arianism, created a huge stir when he denied the full deity of Christ. Ultimately this had to be dealt with in one of the early church councils, and is the main reason that the early Christians went to such lengths to spell out the concept of the Trinity (the Nicene Creed). In modern times, unitarian groups besides the Jehovah's Witnesses include Oneness Pentecostals, Unity Church, and The Unification Church.

Why Jehovah's Witnesses Try to Use Trinitarian Beliefs to Disprove a Biblical Understanding.

Jehovah's Witnesses appeal to the distinction between the economic and ontological Trinity based on their unique way of interpreting the Bible, as if the two views of Trinity are separate things. For instance, many biblical passages describe the Son as:

- obeying the Father,
- being sent by the Father,
- praying to the Father,
- receiving authority from the Father,
- or speaking of the Father as "greater."

They argue that these passages describe not merely a functional distinction, but an actual inequality of nature or being. In other words, they interpret the economic Trinity as revealing ontological inferiority (inferiority of being). In trying to prove that point, they will commonly cite:

- John 14:28 - "the Father is greater than I"
- 1 Corinthians 11:3 - "the head of Christ is God"
- Colossians 1:15 - Christ is the "firstborn of all creation"

- Mark 13:32 - the Son not knowing the day or hour of the second coming

From these texts they conclude:

- Jesus is subordinate to the Father in essence,
- therefore Jesus cannot be Almighty God,
- therefore the Trinity is false.

Of course, to come to their conclusion, they have to use proof texting where they take Bible verses out of context and use them to prove their premise. They don't begin with Scripture and exegete it to come to their conclusion, but rather begin with their Jehovah's Witness doctrine and search out verses that they believe back up their point.

Traditional Christian theology responds to their false interpretation by saying those passages that portray Christ's role in His incarnation and work of redemption (economic Trinity), do not refer to His divine essence (ontological Trinity).

For example, in becoming man, the Son *voluntarily* accepted limitations and submission, yet He still possessed full deity. He "humbled Himself" (Philippians 2:8) in order to come to earth to accomplish the work of salvation. Thus, biblical Christianity distinguishes between Christ's eternal nature and His earthly role: Christ has a divine nature but played an incarnational role to accomplish man's salvation.

That is why Christians must point to passages affirming Christ's deity when dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses. Specific verses that make that point include:

- John 1:1 - "the Word was God"
- John 20:28 - Thomas calls Jesus "My Lord and my God"
- Colossians 2:9 - "all the fullness of Deity dwells in Him (Christ)"
- Hebrews 1:8 - the Son is addressed as God

So the disagreement between biblical theology and Jehovah's Witness beliefs ultimately come from different assumptions about how to interpret biblical passages regarding Christ's submission to the Father.

- Jehovah's Witnesses generally treat submission as proof that Jesus had a lesser nature than the Father.
- Historic Trinitarian theology treats submission in redemption as a voluntary role Christ took on while on earth in order to accomplish the work of salvation.

Don't Get Sidetracked

Typically, the Jehovah's Witnesses who might be inclined to make these heavy theological arguments are going to be the ones who are very argumentative – and perhaps even quite nasty. Their goal is generally not to convince you of the rightness of their belief, but they somehow think they are going to get points with God by winning an argument.

If you ever face this situation, you need to be aware that you are probably not headed to a civil discussion. At that point, you will have to decide whether or not that person will even allow you explain the biblical view. It is not impossible that it could turn out to be an opportunity for you to witness to them, but it is more likely that you will not really get that chance.

In any event, you need to be prepared in your own understanding so that you will not be confused or led astray by arguments that might otherwise be somewhat theologically technical. Thus, the primary reason for this explanation is so that you will have enough knowledge of this subject so as not to be taken off guard.

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