


## Between Ontology, Epistemology and African Context: The Trinity in Edwards and Barth

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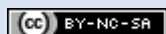
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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary African theology continues to wrestle with the challenge of expressing the doctrine of the Trinity in ways that are theologically faithful and culturally resonant. While Western Trinitarian formulations have been shared by metaphysical and epistemological paradigms, they often fail to account for the African relational and Communal worldview. Although rooted in orthodox Trinitarian confession, African Christianity lacks a contextual theological framework that meaningfully integrates its socio-spiritual realities. Through a Historical Retrieval and Reappropriation Methodology, this article examines the implications of Edward's 18th-century metaphysical framework and Barth's 20th-century revelatory approach for contemporary theology. Edwards' relational ontology, grounded in love and articulated through the Spirit as the bond between the Father and Son, aligns with the African conception of Communal identity and personhood. In contrast, Barth's revelatory epistemology offers methodological clarity, emphasizing divine self-revelation as a safeguard against syncretism. This study situates Edwards and Barth in a conversation within an African context, offering a relational and revelation-based approach to Trinitarian theology that affirms the interconnectedness of divine life and human community. This article contributes to ongoing Trinitarian discourse by advancing a contextual theological framework that bridges Western doctrinal traditions and African epistemologies, aiming to shape orthodox and socially transformative theology.

**Keywords:** *Trinity, Divine Love, Revelation, Edwards, Barth, Africa Theology*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity has provided the philosophical framework of Christian theology with which the Church engages the knowledge of God, the salvation of souls, and the integration of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Two particular voices — Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth are especially noteworthy examples among the many contributors to Trinitarian theology. Edwards, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Puritan theologian, worked out a highly philosophical, metaphysical account of the Trinity in which God was a being of infinite love and delight.<sup>2</sup> His Trinitarian theology rests on the notion that the Holy Spirit acts as the “bond of love” between the Father and the Son, the basis for divine and human relationships.<sup>3</sup>

Modernity had presented serious challenges to the classical doctrine of the Trinity, but 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian Karl Barth reworked Trinitarian theology in light of those challenges, especially the challenges presented by liberal theology.<sup>4</sup> His doctrine of the Trinity is mainly Christocentric, holding that the true nature of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, and the revelation that comes through Christ is the definitive basis for understanding how to think of the divine being.<sup>5</sup> Barth’s denial of natural theology and the precedence of revelation over metaphysical speculation stand starkly in contrast to Edwards’ own approach.<sup>6</sup> While they differ in several ways, there are points at which both theologians have much to offer a contemporary consideration of the Trinity, especially in terms of divine love, revelation, and the relational aspect of God.

Despite their theological and methodological divergences, Edwards and Barth converge in significant respects, particularly in their shared account of divine love, revelation, and relationality. Nevertheless, a lacuna remains with respect to research into how their respective Trinitarian visions may influence and complement each other within the context of contemporary theology, often characterized by disintegration, isolationism and an identity crisis. This study then aims to compare and contrast the Trinitarian theologies of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, by focusing on particular characteristics of their respective conceptions of divine love, mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) and relationship. The contributor question guiding this study is: What might Edwards and Barth’s Trinitarian paradigms offer for today’s understanding of divine relationality as it pertains to human community and theological ethics?

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a non-empirical theological method of Historical Retrieval and Reappropriation delineated by Dr. George Coon<sup>7</sup> to investigate how classical Trinitarian thought could be meaningfully interpreted within an African theological context. The methodology emphasizes a two-step process: extracting theological concepts from historical contexts and reapplying them to contemporary circumstances (Falconer 2024, 75). The research starts with the retrieval of the Trinitarian doctrines of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth by means of a close reading and analysis of key primary texts such as *Edwards’ Discourse on the Trinity* and *Treatise on Grace*, as well as Barth’s *Church Dogmatics I/1 and I/2*. These texts were studied in relation to the historical, philosophical, and theological contexts in which they are situated, primarily Edwards’ relational ontology and Barth’s revelatory epistemology. Having laid the internal theological logic of each thinker, the study then juxtaposes these

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 15–17.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216–222.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 131–134.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12–20.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 295–297.

<sup>6</sup> John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), 48–53.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Falconer, ed., *Research Methodologies*. Johannesburg: South African Theological Seminary, 2024, 75.

approaches to trace points of convergence and divergence regarding divine relationality, revelation, and personhood. Then, these insights are properly reappropriated in conversation with African theological concepts especially as they relate to communal identity, relational ontology, and pneumatological consciousness. This served as an expository and systematic contextual Trinitarian framework that responds deeply to African realities while remaining faithful to the core of Christian orthodoxy. Although this research is a theoretical study and not an empirical data collection exercise, it nevertheless remains primarily a doctrinal, conceptual, and contextual theological reflection.

### **3.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY: EDWARDS' METAPHYSICS TO BARTH'S REVELATION**

Two pivotal eras in the history of Trinitarian theology represent significant transitions.<sup>8</sup> Edwards emerged out of a Puritan theological tradition in the 18th century, heavily influenced by Neoplatonic and Augustinian thought.<sup>9</sup> He used Augustine's psychological analogy, in which the Trinity defines the human mind: the Father as mind's self-awareness, the Son as mind's perfect idea, and the Spirit as unifying love.<sup>10</sup> Edwards uniquely and classically Westernized this model by specifying love instead of "otherness" as the Spirit's characteristic.<sup>11</sup>

Edwards' framework grew out of his universal metaphysical and philosophical interpretation of reality, in which God was one infinitely perfect being that was eternally in a state of absolute happiness and self-sufficiency.<sup>12</sup> His vision of Trinity as a vivifying, relational, and very "loving" reality thoroughly influenced all subsequent theological discourse.<sup>13</sup> The theological landscape transformed dramatically by the 20th century when Barth confronted modernity's serious challenges to classical Trinitarian doctrine<sup>14</sup> by responding specifically to liberal theology's challenges.<sup>15</sup> Barth reworked Trinitarian thought by renouncing speculative metaphysics.<sup>16</sup> Barth strongly objected to the idea of knowing God as Triune apart from his historical acts in general and Jesus Christ in particular.<sup>17</sup>

And these alternative histories generated different approaches at their substantive heart: Edwards saw God as an infinite perfect being, an intellectual metaphysic, while Barth argued that if we do not see through Christ the divine nature, we see nothing of the divine nature at all.<sup>18</sup> The trajectory of the tradition here highlights how Trinitarian ideas have resisted intellectual approaches while remaining firmly rooted in orthodoxy: the implications for reflection regarding our contemporary theological setting are significant and methodological in principle.<sup>19</sup>

#### **3.1 Jonathan Edwards on the Trinity: The Bond of Love**

Jonathan Edwards' theology of the Trinity is situated within his larger metaphysical and philosophical view of reality. He saw God as an infinitely perfect being whose state of being was one of supreme happiness and self-sufficiency. For Edwards, the Trinity is not just a doctrine to be affirmed; instead,

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan, Edwards. *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*. Edited by Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1994), 262.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine. *The Trinity*. Translated by Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 9-15.

<sup>10</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 314.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver D. Crisp. *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 187.

<sup>12</sup> George, Marsden. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 456.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney. *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 219.

<sup>14</sup> Karl, Barth. *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 260.

<sup>15</sup> Webster, *Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 344.

<sup>18</sup> Fred, Sanders. *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. McClymond. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

it is the very inner life of God, revealed in an eternal outpouring of love; one to the other. Edwards famously wrote in his *Discourse on the Trinity*: “And the Father is the Deity existing in the most prime, unoriginated, and absolutely highest way. The Son is the God begotten of the Father's thought, or idea of himself. The Holy Ghost is the Deity breathed out in infinite love and delight.”<sup>20</sup>

This passage captures Edwards' vision of the Trinity as a vivifying, relational, and profoundly affectionate reality. God the Father is perfectly Himself and pours forth His divine self-image, the Son. In turn, the Spirit walks out, as the love of the Father for the Son, and the love of the Son for the Father, holding them in complete oneness with one another. Edwards' model, then, does not separate the Holy Spirit from Jesus as a separate person, but rather identifies the Holy Spirit as the personal love of God: “a bond of union, wherein the Deity perfects itself in unutterable delight.”<sup>21</sup>

Now, Edwards' understanding of the Trinity is thoroughly shaped by both Neoplatonic and Augustinian thought. He employs the psychological analogy of Augustine, in which the Trinity is a way of describing the human mind: the Father is the mind's awareness of itself, the Son is the perfect idea of the mind, and the Spirit is the love that unites them.<sup>22</sup> However, Edwards adapts this model by making love, rather than otherness, the characteristic of the Spirit's procession. Instead of the traditional Western cosmological description of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), Edwards teaches that the Spirit is the loving between the Father and the Son. Thus, he rests upon an affective or relational ontology, one where love is not simply an attribute of God but where love is central to God's very existence.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Edwards' Trinitarianism is immersed in his wider metaphysical idealism. He argues that all reality is grounded in the communicative nature of God. Given that God is a being of infinite beauty and delight, His very existence is an act of self-communication. This communication with itself happens both internally, within the life of God (the begetting of the Son, the spiration of the Spirit), and externally, in the act of creating and redeeming the world. Therefore, it becomes evident that the Trinity is not an abstract doctrine but the basis of all divine actions.<sup>24</sup> The significance of the Spirit's identity as divine love, for Edwards, is enormous. There is not an impersonal force or a mere result of the personal coming together of the Son and the Father, but rather a true subsistence which eternally proceeds from the “interior joy” and the “delight” of the Father and the Son together. This is a good analogy that preserves the unity in the Godhead while maintaining the distinctness of each divine person. The perfect mutual knowledge the Father and Son have for one another naturally produces an equal act of mutual love, which Edwards identifies as the Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

This framework has powerful ramifications for divine communion. Unlike some Western theological models that ultimately prioritize divine essence over divine persons, Edwards sees the persons of the Trinity existing within a dynamic, relational reality. Love is not an afterthought about God's nature but the mode of His existence. This relational ontology pushes back against overly static or mechanistic notions of the divine and emphasizes the deeply personal quality of the Triune life.<sup>26</sup>

Edwards' Trinitarian theology is not just metaphysical but also soteriological. As the bond of love in the Trinity, the Spirit realizes the works of redemption precisely by drawing humans into that same divine love. For Edwards, salvation is to be part of the Trinitarian life. Regeneration is therefore perceived as a spiritual adoption wherein that same love of God represented by the Spirit is shared with believers so that they can take part in the love that eternally embraces the Father and the Son. This aligns with what Paul writes in Romans 5:5 (ESV), “For God's love has been poured into our

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1994), 262.

<sup>21</sup> McClymond and McDermott. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 314.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97

<sup>25</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Fred, Sanders. *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 154.

hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us,” my emphasis, for God himself and God’s love was what the Father gave into our hearts, instead of our hearts (as if workers) earning the inheritance as in the previous chapter. Likewise, union with Christ is central to Edwards’ soteriology. For through union with Christ, who is the perfect self-expression of the Father, we who have received Christ by Faith are brought into the very life of the Trinity. According to Marsden<sup>27</sup>, it is through the Spirit that believers are behind the scenes of the Son and learn of the love the Son has for the Father and are shaped into his image. Moreover, in Edwards’ understanding, sanctification is deeply related to the work of the Spirit. Since the Spirit is divine love, sanctification is not only moral improvement but an ever-growing participation in divine life. The believer’s change is not outward conformity but inward renewal in love. Edwards argues that true holiness is a working of divine affection, not a mechanical conforming to law. As he puts it in *Religious Affections*, “True religion does, in a great degree, consist in holy affections.”<sup>28</sup> In this light, love is the fulcrum of Christian ethics, and spirituality is ultimately about being drawn into the love of God.

Edwards’ doctrine of the Trinity, as an eternal movement of divine love, gives an insight of deep richness to the very being of God and His relationship to all of creation. His focus on the Spirit as the personal bond of love makes for a powerful alternative to more abstract formulations of the doctrine. Additionally, connecting Trinitarian theology to soteriology, he emphasizes the practical relevance of the Trinity for Christian life. In Edwards’ mind, to know God is to come into His love, and to be saved is to be pulled into this eternal communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The implications of Jonathan Edwards’ view of the Trinity extend beyond simply understanding divine love to encompass the dynamics of human relationships as well. If the Holy Spirit is God’s very love, then love itself lies at the heart of reality. McClymond and McDermott in advancing the argument asserted that divine love is not simply one of God’s attributes but is ontologically constitutive of who He is. Edwards’ Trinitarian theology thus subverts any static or abstract understanding of God and positions Him as precisely that which necessarily exists in a communion of love. And since the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and Son, the inner life of God is one of endless self-gift, delight, and joy.<sup>29</sup> For Edwards, this has direct effects on Christian spirituality and ethics because love is the greatest virtue; it is the cardinal virtue of the Spirit-bearing people united to God. In *Religious Affections*, he argues that the true experience of a Christian life is not merely intellectual agreement or morality but rather a deep love of God.<sup>30</sup> The believer’s experience of God is therefore not circumscribed to rational or volitional modalities but is deeply affective, participating in the Trinitarian love that defines divine existence.<sup>31</sup> This is a perennial point within Edwards’ system of thought, as Edwards’ broader theological anthropology illustrates that the activity of human will is essentially directed by the affections rather than independent rational deliberation. It is why being pulled into the life of God by the Spirit means that one’s desires are reshaped by divine love.

Edwards’ Trinitarian theology also offers a way of understanding God in relation to creation. Since God is a fully self-sufficient fountain of love, His creation of the world is not a matter of necessity, but an outflow of His infinite goodness.<sup>32</sup> This is different from philosophical deism, which holds that there is a distant and impersonal God. Instead, Edwards offers a vision of a deeply relational God who longs for fellowship with His creation. He writes, “There are these three ways wherein God is glorified in Himself: (1) By the idea or image of Himself, the brightness of His glory, which He had within Himself, and (2) by the subsistence of the second person of the Godhead in this perfect idea that

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<sup>27</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 456.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 237.

<sup>29</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 316.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, 237.

<sup>31</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians*, 190.

<sup>32</sup> Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 98.

He had within Himself, and (3) in the Holy Spirit, in His infinite love and delight in Himself.”<sup>33</sup> From this point of view, creation is not an arbitrary act, but a natural continuation of divine love. Just as the Father begets the Son and the Spirit proceeds out of love, so God’s creation works flow from his Trinitarian nature. This way of knowing God as love and creation brings delightful implications for Christian community and ethics because the Trinity dwells in a relationship of self-giving love; human relationships should also be defined by selflessness, unity, and delight in the well-being of others. Edwards argues that Christian love must resemble the immanent nature of God, writing, “heavenly love is always humble and condescending.”<sup>34</sup> So, his Trinitarian theology roots Christian ethics not in duty or mere divine command but in the very life of God Himself. This has direct implications for the believer’s relationship with the other in the Church. If the Spirit is the mutual love between the Father and the Son, then the Spirit’s presence in the Christian community will have a-like effect, fostering communion and love.<sup>35</sup>

Edwards’ Trinitarian vision reorients our understanding of salvation as well because salvation is participation in the Trinitarian life, it is not a mere forensic or external reality but an internal transformation into love itself.<sup>36</sup> The believer does not simply receive a justification in the presence of God but is incorporated into the eternal love which flows between the Persons of the Trinity. Thus, also Edwards’ theology looks forward to contemporary conversations about *theosis*, or the idea that salvation involves genuine participation in the divine nature.<sup>37</sup> And Edwards’ doctrine of the Spirit as divine love thus provides a rich resource to understand sanctification as the believer’s increasing conformity to the loving nature of God.

Again, Edwards’ theology of divine love has implications for worship. If God’s being is love, then worship is not so much a duty as an invitation into the joy of God. Edwards depicts heaven as a space of “infinite love and joy,” wherein the redeemed partake of God’s ineffable joy ad infinitum.<sup>38</sup> This eschatological vision reflects the centrality of love in Christian life. Worship, prayer, and devotion are not in the first instance formalities, but give believers part in the love that has always been shared among the persons of the Triune God.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Edwards’ Trinitarian theology provides an attractive account of divine love as being at the heart of God’s being itself. The affective and relational character of divine and human life is further evidenced in his stress on the Holy Spirit as the bond of love in the Trinity. Instead, this vision reframes Christian spirituality with a God alive with ultimate love, inviting believers not merely to know God as an idea, but to enter into an experiential unity with limitless love itself. It also roots Christian ethics in God’s own being, confirming self-giving love as the model for human relations. More so, Edwards’ Trinitarian structure reshapes our grasp of creation, salvation, and worship, locating them in the eternal love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Grounded in the self-giving love of the Triune God, Edwards describes a relational, joyous, and transformative Christian life.

### **3.2 Karl Barth on the Trinity: The Self-Disclosure of God**

Karl Barth’s Trinitarian theology is decisively determined by his rejection of natural theology and his insistence that only by divine revelation we come to know God. The Trinity is not a doctrine of speculation based on the principles of human reason but rather is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Barth contends that when anyone tries to know God outside of God’s self-revelation in Christ, he or she ends up with a warped and ultimately idolatrous vision of the Godhead.

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," 501–832*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 131.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, 341.

<sup>35</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Sanders, *The Triune God*, 158.

<sup>37</sup> McClymond, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 412.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* 350.

<sup>39</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven, 460.

As he expresses in *Church Dogmatics*, “The doctrine of the Trinity is the doctrine which properly distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian. It is “the doctrine of God’s revelation.”<sup>40</sup>

According to Barth, the Trinity is not a being to be analyzed by philosophical dissection but a self-revealing reality. He denies that the doctrine of the Trinity is derivable from metaphysical speculation or abstract theological principles. Rather, he contends that God as a Triune being is known only through his works of self-revelation in the course of history. In *Church Dogmatics* I/1 he writes, “God’s being is in-act,” which means that God is who he is in his acts of self-revealing.<sup>41</sup> This theological turn represents a break from classical theistic models, whereby the absolute God’s essence, will, and action were the basis of any analysis of God, and instead locates the doctrine of the Trinity in the periphery of what can be known of divine revelation. Hence, for Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity unfolds in the threefold modes of divine being: God the Revealer (the Father), God the Revealed (the Son), and God the Revealed-ness (the Spirit). Through the current archetypes, Barth constructs the doctrine of the Trinity to highlight the unity of God in His self-revelation within His being. He contends that the story of God revealing himself is a single, cohesive event in which God is the one who reveals himself, the content of that revelation, and the light making it intelligible. Barth is careful, then, to maintain that this does not imply modalism but continuity in the way God has revealed Himself to mankind.<sup>42</sup>

In working this Trinitarian model out, Barth moves away from traditional language about divine “persons” and highlights God’s self-communication as constitutive of the identity of Trinitarian life. Alongside the risk of unnecessary speculation about substance, Barth also challenged the classical terminology of persona in Western theological tradition or hypostasis in Eastern tradition. Instead, he argues that the economic Trinity—the life of God in salvation history, reflecting the revealed identity of God toward the world is the key to understanding the eternal being of God. The one God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in Scripture reveals Himself as the One who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> Not only the way He appears to us, but the way He truly is in Himself.”<sup>44</sup> This line is central for Barth’s dismissal of any radical distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, a distinction that had been highlighted in classical Christian theology for a long time.

One of the major implications of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity is that our knowledge of God is fully reliant on grace because God can only be known through revelation, human reason alone cannot arrive at a correct view of God’s nature. In Barth’s historical context, this rejection of natural theology was more important since Barth was responding in part to the influence of liberal Protestantism, which had increasingly depended on human experience and reason as sources of theological knowledge. In resistance to this trend, Barth claims “God can be known only of God.”<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Barth’s Trinitarian theology has rich Christological implications. Revelation is the basis of Trinitarian doctrine; therefore, the person of Jesus Christ is the further key to understanding the Triune God. This self-revelation of God is by its very nature Trinitarian, Barth insists, for in Christ, God fully and definitively opens up himself. Jesus is not just a messenger or an intermediary between God and humanity; He is the eternal Son of God, the self-revealer (John 1:1-4, 14). The Father sends the Son, and the Spirit brings this revelation to bear in the human mind. Far from being abstract doctrine separate from salvation; the Trinity is intimately connected to God’s salvific work.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 344.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 260.

<sup>42</sup> Webster, *Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 399.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/2*, 301.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 297.

<sup>46</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92.

Barth's opposition to natural theology and his emphasis on revelation also have implications for his understanding of divine freedom. The problem of evil and its solution, therefore, is not abstract: it must begin from God's being, as He reveals Himself freely through acts that happen in history. Classical theistic models typically start with abstract definitions of divine attributes. Barth's theology is resistant to the idea that God is first known in Himself and then only secondarily concerning the world. Rather, God's actions, he claims, fully reveal His being. As Bruce McCormack puts it, "Barth never thinks of God's being apart from His self-revealing activity. The divine life is not a static reality but an event."<sup>47</sup>

Barth's Trinity approach has implications for both ecclesiology and Christian discipleship. If God's being is essentially revealed in His self-communication, then the Church's mission is to bear faithful witness to this divine revelation. It is not speculation, but the most appropriate response to the self-revealing Word of God. At a deeper level, Christian faith is not based on abstract philosophical propositions but on the concrete history of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. And so, Barth's stress upon revelation as the bedrock of Trinitarian theology invites the Church to a posture of humility, dependence, and fidelity in proclamation.

To summarize, Barth's Trinitarian theology stands as both an unequivocal rejection of classical natural theology as well as a reclaiming of the doctrine's revelatory ground. By demanding that knowledge of God is dependent only upon His self-revelation, Barth ensures that the Trinity is not an abstraction or speculation but anchored concretely in the history of salvation. His trilogiematic formulation of the Trinity (the Revealer, the Revealed, and the Revealed-ness), for instance, emphasizes the dynamic, relational nature of God's being. Moreover, there is a sharp division between the immanent and economic Trinity, yet it is not to be understood in terms of God's actions, which are not separate from God's nature. Barth's Trinitarian theology ultimately invites the Church to understand that the being of God is revealed in the acts of God and that the Christian faith depends solely on the grace of divine revelation.

#### **4.0 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: EDWARDS AND BARTH ON THE TRINITY**

Despite starting in disparate methodological and theological places, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth converge on a common vision of divine relationality and love regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Edwards' Trinitarian theology is profoundly metaphysical, founded on the inner life of God as an eternal motion of love, whereas Barth's is revelational, framing the economy of salvation as the way in which the Triune nature of God is known. An overview at this point, summarizes their major points of convergence and divergence with regard to their approaches to method, the role of the Holy Spirit, divine relationality, and implications for soteriology

##### **4.1 Methodological Foundations: Ontology versus Revelation**

Edwards and Barth construct their Trinitarian theology from radically different foundations. Edwards' theological method is grounded in a metaphysical and participatory ontology in the Augustinian and Neoplatonic tradition. God, he imagines, is an infinite being — love and delight itself eternally self-communing in the Godhead. The Father generates the Son, the ideal of Himself, and the Spirit proceeds as the boundless love between them.<sup>48</sup> His approach shows a strong inclination for a priori reasoning, attempting to grant insights into God's nature by reflecting on divine being and what its relational structure is like in the Trinity. For Edwards, knowledge of God can only be rooted in the inner life of God, and the inner-life forms the basis of the economy of salvation.

Unlike many modern theologians like Hegel, Barth avoids metaphysical speculation and roots his theology in divine self-revelation. His insistence that God's Triune nature is not something that man can come to discover by infusion through natural theology or human reason but rather must be

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<sup>47</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, 262.



made known through God's own activity in history, is a critical insight from the long and arduous history of Christian thought. In Barth's words, "God's being is in His act"<sup>49</sup>, and thus theology can only speak of the Trinity in the light of God's own self-revelation in Christ. Whereas Edwards starts, then, with God's immanent being, and moves in the direction of the economy of salvation, Barth starts with God's economic revelation and works backward, toward his eternal being.<sup>50</sup>

All these methodological divergences lead eventually to the same conclusion in both theologians, namely the rejection of a static, abstract doctrine of God. Both Edwards' emphasis on divine love and Barth's emphasis on revelation affirm that God's being is relational and self-communicative. Barth's emphasis on epistemology means that if we do know about the Trinity, we do so as creatures grounded in divine action, not speculative metaphysics.

#### **4.2 The Work of the Holy Spirit: Love versus Revelation**

A key point of difference between Edwards and Barth relates to the identity of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity and what we do with that. Edwards famously characterizes the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son saying, "The Holy Spirit is the Deity breathed forth in infinite love and delight."<sup>51</sup> In this view, the Spirit is not just an impersonal force, but a subsisting person whose very nature is love. This has significant ramifications for soteriology, as salvation is understood as participation in the divine love in the Trinity. In contrast, Barth does not focus on the Spirit as the bond of love but the mode of God's self-revelation. Barth calls the Trinity the Revealer (Father), the Revelation (Son), and the Revealedness (Spirit).<sup>52</sup> In Barth's thought, the Spirit is the divine agent who guarantees that Christ's revelation will be heard and taken on by believers. Whereas Edwards identifies the Spirit ontologically with love, Barth identifies the Spirit functionally with the actualization of divine revelation.<sup>53</sup>

These views have different implications. Edwards' thought understands the Spirit as the divine communion's personal, affective center, which in turn orientates Christian spirituality and ethicality, while Barth's theology, by contrast, and insists that illumination and faith happen by the Spirit, so that revelation truly efficaciously occurs in history. Yet, both theologians—theologians, I should say, of similar stature and standing in the tradition contest this Elizabethan notion: the Spirit is at once a part of divine relationality, as love in the view of Edwards or as imminent revelatory presence in the voice of Barth.

#### **4.3 Divine Relationality: Participation versus Encounter**

Both Edwards and Barth agree that God's being is intrinsically relational, but they understand this relationality in different ways. Edwards imagines the Trinity as a self-communicative, self-reflexive motion of infinite joy in which the persons of the Godhead dwell in harmonious being through reciprocal knowledge and love.<sup>54</sup> This relational ontology suggests that when we come to know God we are drawn into this divine communion of love, and thus human involvement in divine life is the very telos of salvation.<sup>55</sup> For Barth, divine relationality is grounded not in the relations among the persons of the Trinity, but in the relationship of God with the world. Whereas Edwards' is intrinsic relationality, Barth's is historical. According to Barth, the Trinity is known because God acts triune-ly in salvation history, most especially in the person of Jesus Christ. He scorns any analogical or

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<sup>49</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 260.

<sup>50</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92.

<sup>51</sup> Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, 262.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 295.

<sup>53</sup> Webster, *Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians*, 187.

<sup>55</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete*, 219.

participatory metaphysics, holding that divine relationality shows itself only within and through Christ.<sup>56</sup>

This distinction influences their understanding of divine love. To Edwards, divine love is an eternal quality of God's being, and the procession of the Spirit as the bond of love makes relationality ontological and necessary. For Barth, divine love is revealed in history, so relationality is not something we glean from ontology but something we recognize from God's self-communication.<sup>57</sup> Still, both theologians reject a static or impersonal doctrine of God, and they present the divine life as active, self-communicative, and relational.

#### **4.4 Soteriological Implications: Is it the Union or Faith?**

Edwards' and Barth's Trinitarian divergence produces quite different concepts of salvation. According to Edwards, salvation is the participation of the saints in the divine love through the Spirit, which means that redemption is not simply forensic but an actual ontological change.<sup>58</sup> As the bond of love, the Spirit draws believers into union with Christ, conforming them to the eternal love of the Father and the Son.<sup>59</sup> This participatory model corresponds to the Eastern Orthodox idea of theosis, in which believers partake in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). In contrast, Barth presents salvation as the response to the divine revealed in the self-revelatory work of Christ; we do not choose Christ, Christ chooses us. He does not insist on participation in divine being but a dynamic relationship of trust in God's Word. After all, for Barth faith is what makes revelation effective for the individual.<sup>60</sup> This means that rather than receiving or participating in an ontological sense, the Spirit is given without bounds, and von Balthasar uses the Johannine literature to support himself on this one as well (eg. 1 John 3:24).

According to Jonathan Edwards, salvation is an essentially relational movement into the divine life—a transformation that occurs at the level of being as a result of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who brings the believer into the mutual embrace of the triune love. For Edwards, the Spirit, as the very bond of love between the Father and the Son, draws the believer into this divine fellowship not as an agent of moral improvement or as the agent of forensic justification, but enters into a radical participation in God's own life. They are received to an intimate, ineffable union with Christ and so, with God." They are, as it were, deified by their participation in Christ."<sup>61</sup> Salvation in this schema is not a transaction, but a transformation, a conforming of believers to the image and delight of the Triune God.

Karl Barth, by contrast, sees salvation above all else as an act of revelation - a direct meeting with the Triune God brought about in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Barth, salvation is not based on the human sharing of divine being, but on God's own electing self-determination, which human beings are then enabled to affirm in faith. He was known for his rejection of all-natural theology and metaphysical speculation, on the grounds that God can only be known in and through God's self-revelation.<sup>62</sup> Faith, therefore, is not the way of union with God's being, but the act by which revelation becomes operative in the life of the person. To Barth, "Faith is that human act which corresponds to the act of God's revelation, but faith is not its presupposition. Revelation awakens faith."<sup>63</sup> The role of the Holy Spirit in Barth's soteriology is to disclose this revelation and to call forth the response of faith, and not to temporarily cause the believer to share in the being of God.

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<sup>56</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 257.

<sup>57</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 193.

<sup>58</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 314.

<sup>59</sup> Sanders, *The Triune God*, 154.

<sup>60</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92.

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, No. 448, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 469.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 192–193.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 235.

As such, the soteriological gap between Edwards and Barth represents a more fundamental theological schism. Salvation in Edwards' perspective is about becoming: an ontological transformation rooted in divine love and partaking whereas, for Barth, salvation is about knowing: a revelatory, Christ-centered encounter rooted in faith. This suggests two competing conceptions of the Spirit's role: for Edwards, the Spirit being as the unity of divine love that ushers the believer into the divine embrace; and for Barth the Spirit being the witness to revelation and the inherent trust in the Word.<sup>64</sup> Thus, while Edwards sees salvation in union with Trinitarian God, Barth sees it in the dynamic act of revelation that evokes obedient faith. These two models, while having their differences, provide interlocking understandings of the riddle of God-human reconciliation and Spirit's varied roles in the economy of salvation.

## **5.0 IMPLICATIONS OF EDWARDS AND BARTH'S TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE FOR THEOLOGY, CHURCH, AND SOCIETY**

This section of the article provides three implications for Edwards' and Barth's Trinitarian thought, especially regarding theology, the Church, and society. In Theology, they reorient the theological method toward a methodological, relational, and revelational framework. Within the Church, their Trinitarian insights form the basis of the Christian community, ethics, and mission. Their theology demands the transformation of human structures and relationships in society so that they conform to the Trinitarian pattern of love and justice.

Theologically, both Edwards and Barth contribute centrally from the refusal of a static and abstract God. Edwards offers a vision of God as an eternal fellowship of love, the Spirit being the binding love between the Father and Son. Second, his Trinitarian thought is rooted in a metaphysical framework that owes keen insights to Augustinian and Neoplatonic sources but is approached derivatively through a relational ontology.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, Barth demurs from all forms of speculative theology, maintaining that the doctrine of the Trinity must be derived entirely from divine revelation. God's being is known, for Barth, through His self-revealing acts in history, especially through Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup> In this aspect, theology is a response to God's self-disclosure; it is not a human project.

Both perspectives encourage theologians to move beyond philosophical speculation into the relational and revelational character of the Triune God himself. Edwards gives this powerfully affective understanding of divine being: love here is not just an attribute of God but the very structure of divine existence.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Barth, McCormack helps keep theology Christocentric and properly sited in the concrete reality of salvation history.<sup>68</sup> Their Trinitarian frameworks thus together serve as a critique of theological approaches that either depersonalize God or that depend far too much on human rationality.

The implications for the theological method of Barth's rejection of natural theology are significant. Where so many theological systems assimilate the insights of secular philosophies or human-centered perspectives, Barth's hermeneutical starting point is that God must disclose himself through revelation.<sup>69</sup> His Christocentric model acts as a preventive measure against anthropocentric theology, keeping theology oriented toward God's self-proclamation as opposed to the fads of culture or academia. While that is one course of response for Edwards, it is not the only move he makes, as he also pushes theology to take seriously the affective and relational aspects of divine life, so that the

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<sup>64</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of The Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 1*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 503–504, where he affirms Barth's emphasis on the Spirit as Witness rather than as ontological bond.

<sup>65</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 314.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 260.

<sup>67</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians*, 187.

<sup>68</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/2*, 344.

doctrine of the Trinity is not... "merely construed as an abstract dogma," but the lived realities shaping human participation in God.<sup>70</sup>

In the life of the Church, Edwards' and Barth's trinitarian theology significantly calls for transformation. The emphasis Edwards places on the Spirit as the bond of love convicts the Church to embody self-giving love in its communal life. For example, if, as has been claimed, the Spirit is the eternal love between the Father and the Son, the Church as the communion of the Spirit must also manifest in its inter-relational, ethical, and missional practices this divine love.<sup>71</sup> Christian unity is not merely a structural or institutional reality; it is the reflection of the oneness of the Triune God. Hence, divisions in the Church can only be effectively resolved not simply through agreement on dogma but through a profound attachment to Trinitarian charity. On the other hand, Barth's insistence that theology is a response to revelation is a reminder to the Church of its primary vocation, which is to proclaim God's self-communication in Christ. When so many churches desire the relevance that comes from falling in step with cultural worldviews, Barth has indeed some work to do to warn against so much humanistic compromise of what revelation is.<sup>72</sup> The Church has not authored her own message but is a steward of God's truth. To be faithful to the gospel, the Church must prefer the Word of God to accommodation with society, so that its mission is determined by revelation and not by the next social fad.<sup>73</sup>

Both Edwards and Barth offer a vision for Christian ethics that is grounded in Trinitarian reality. For Edwards, divine love does not merely describe a theological cerebral cocktail but is the very basis of Christian morality. This indwelling is not simply a change of mind and heart but a becoming a part of the eternal love of God.<sup>74</sup> This means Christian ethics must be seen not as formal adherence to rules but as participation in divine love. Barth, in contrast, highlights the missional implication of the Church as the witness eventuating from God's self-revelation. God has acted definitively in Christ; consequently, the Church is called to testify to that act through its preaching, service, and moral integrity.<sup>75</sup>

Within the society, Edwards' and Barth's Trinitarian thought also has much to say to wider societal structures and relationships. By emphasizing that divine love is at the heart of God's nature, Edwards provides the basis for an understanding that, at least professionally to Edwards, human society ought to be ordered by relationality and self-giving rather than individualism and self-interest.<sup>76</sup> Love is the defining characteristic of God's being, so if that true God is the one to whom we relate, our relations, including as personal, political, and economic beings, must reflect that divine pattern. Justice, mercy, and common good are not just hypothetical ethical ideals; they are part of the relational nature of the Triune God himself. More so, Barth's emphasis upon revelation challenges society's dependence on human autonomy as the pillar of morality and truth. In such a culture that places a high value on either subjective experience or the rational autonomy of the individual and thus often neglects divine authority, Barth affirms that truth is not constructed but received.<sup>77</sup> His theology resists the secular impulse to base ethics on human reasoning alone, rather demanding an ethic grounded in divine revelation. This has bearings on social justice, human rights and public morality, in that it re-establishes the grounds for ethical discourse as lying in God's self-disclosing truth rather than human agreement.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete*, 219.

<sup>71</sup> Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 193.

<sup>73</sup> Webster, *Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>74</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven, 456.

<sup>75</sup> Sanders, *The Triune God*, 154.

<sup>76</sup> McClymond, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 412.

<sup>77</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, 297.

<sup>78</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 92.

## **6.0 TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY IN AFRICAN CONTEXT: EDWARDS AND BARTH IN DIALOGUE**

The post-Reformation theological frameworks of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth offer rich soil for dialogue with African perspectives on theology. Theirs are unique approaches to Trinitarian theology that provide helpful perspectives for situating Christian doctrine within African religious thought and practice. Western theological tradition thus converged with African religious sensibilities creating a unique theological conversation and development.

Edwards' focus on the multi-relational nature of the Godhead as an eternal giving and receiving of divine love strikes a chord with African communal consciousness, especially with the concept of ubuntu as articulated by Bujo, who emphasizes the community character of African theological reflection.<sup>79</sup> That love is the very essence of how God exists on the divine side, as a generous theological lens through which to view African notions of community and interconnectedness. John Mbiti demonstrates traditional African thought, emphasizing that existence itself is intrinsically relational; an emphasis that mirrors Edwards' relational ontology in astonishingly parallel ways.<sup>80</sup>

Edwards' theology has particular relevance with regard to its pneumatological dimensions in sub-Saharan African Christian thought. His understanding of the Holy Spirit as the "bond of love"<sup>81</sup> resonates with African spiritual sensibilities examined by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, who argues how Spirit-consciousness permeates the African religious experience.<sup>82</sup> Edwards' theory of the Spirit as divine love thus grounds African spiritual experiences in sound theological principles while defending an orthodox Trinitarian system. On the other hand, Karl Barth's emphatic view of divine self-revelation provides vital methodological resources for African theological reflection.<sup>83</sup> According to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, African theology emerges as a third direction threading the course between indigenous wisdom and Christian revelation.<sup>84</sup> Barth's claim that "God can be known only by God"<sup>85</sup> serves as a guiding principle in how one may construct a theological framework in which divine revelation occurs within African cultural contexts.

Both Edwards and Barth work in contexts where the social and ethical implications of their work can be applied particularly well in the African contexts. James Henry Owino Kombo, shows how African Christian thought inherently connects divine nature to social ordering.<sup>86</sup> Edwards' vision that human society ought to be ordered by relationality instead of individualism provides theological justification for African perspectives on social justice and community development.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Barth's focus on divine revelation instead of autonomous human reasoning encourages African theologians to ornament their local approaches with biblical fidelity.<sup>88</sup>

Charles Nyamiti's work on Christ as our Ancestor plays a crucial role in connecting Jonathan Edwards' participatory ontology with African theological anthropology.<sup>89</sup> By re-imagining the traditional African understanding of ancestral mediation, Nyamiti portrays Christ as the ultimate Mediator, who having both divine and human natures, both meets and exceeds all notions of what the

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<sup>79</sup> Benezet, Bujo. *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 15

<sup>80</sup> John S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108-110.

<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, 149.

<sup>82</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 22-24.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, Ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 295.

<sup>84</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 295.

<sup>86</sup> James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and The African Intellectual Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 85.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathan, Edwards. *Charity and Its Fruits*. Edited by Kyle C. Strobel (Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2012), 206.

<sup>88</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 192-194.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from An African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 50-55.

ancestors could provide. Ancestors represent continuation and mediate blessings, but Christ mediates the divine life itself. This vision mirrors Edwards' account of salvation, whereby by the Spirit, believers are brought into fellowship with the Triune God in a bond of love.<sup>90</sup> In Edwards' participatory ontology then Christ is not just one revered figure among ancestors, he is the unique and eternal Ancestor whereby all of humanity participates in divine love. At the same time, Diane Stinton<sup>91</sup> argues that Karl Barth's Christocentric approach offers positive methodological measures denying the possibility of reducing Christ to a mere cultural construct in favor of the priority of God's self-revelation in Scripture. Collectively, Nyamiti, Edwards, and Barth provide a concrete basis for a Christology that is authentically African and theologically truthful.

According to Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, the challenge of brewing African theology "in an African pot" is to form a theology that springs from the realities of the African situation and yet does not cut itself off from the wider world of the universal Church.<sup>92</sup> He calls for African theology to grow out of indigenous life, culture and experience without departing from Christian orthodoxy. This ideal is much supported by Jonathan Edwards' participatory ontology, centering on relational communion between God and the human. Edwards' framework makes space for African relational categories such as kinship and mediation to find theological articulation without compromising Trinitarian orthodoxy. Conversely, Karl Barth's revelatory epistemology proscribes that theology ought to be normed by divine revelation, not cultural context, introducing an essential tension, as Barth himself would talk about it. His emphasis is vital to ensuring that contextualization is accountable to Scripture.

Furthermore, African Christian theology has vast potential to enrich Western Trinitarian thought through its theological engagement.<sup>93</sup> Edwards and Barth serve as important interlocutors as African theology develops, providing resources for developing a Trinitarian doctrine that speaks to African realities while also grounding itself in the universal church. This exchange illustrates the vitality of classical theology; that it can be expressed in new, non-Western contexts, without sacrificing import or meaning.<sup>94</sup> This kind of engagement, as Bujo asserts, enriches global theological conversations and adds to the depth of the local Western theological tradition with African nuances of spirituality.<sup>95</sup> The synthesis of Edwards, Barth, and African theologies works toward a contextual theology that is both authentically African and faithfully Christian.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth provide two different but interdependent frameworks for delivering a contextual doctrine of Trinity that is both theologically informed and culturally resonant in African theological conversations. Edwards' relational ontology, the archetype of divine love, with the Spirit as the personal bond uniting the Father and Son, corresponds profoundly with African communal values and spiritual sensibilities. Edwards' theology is based in the participatory union of human life with divine life; for him, salvation and sanctification are found in the entry into the eternal love of the Triune God. By contrast, Barth's revelatory epistemology insists on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the only basis for theological reflection. Barth's dismissal of speculative metaphysics protects theology from the threat of cultural assimilation and reasserts the priority of revelation. Together these theologians provide a useful framework for an African Trinitarian

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<sup>90</sup> Edwards, *The End for which God Created the World*, In *the Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 526–528.

<sup>91</sup> Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 42.

<sup>92</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *Theology Brewed in An African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 3-5.

<sup>93</sup> Tite Tiénou, "Christian Theology and African Renewal," In *Globalizing Theology*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

<sup>94</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, 3–5.

<sup>95</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 24.

that is both relational and revelatory—a theology that affirms the ontological communion of God while shaping the Church’s identity and mission in African contexts. Drawing from their insights, this study aims to provide a theological framework that speaks meaningfully to African ecclesial life by active retrieval and reappropriation, and proposes pathways for justice, reconciliation, and flourishing grounded by the being and revelation of the Triune God himself.

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