
A Journey of Participation

The good news of Christian salvation, which includes the various facets of justification, sanctification, glorification, and vocation or mission, is often expressed within popular evangelicalism in cold, forensic categories. In these terms, the gospel is presented as a means to being forgiven so that a person can obtain a righteous standing before God, gain heaven, and escape from hell. Often called “the gospel of sin management,”¹ this way of understanding salvation rings familiar for many Evangelicals. However, isolated from a relational ethos and transformed affections (loving Christ for Christ’s sake rather than for my sake, as Edwards suggests), it smacks of hedonism: Who would not want to avoid hell and take the heaven option? One’s first thought might be to imagine that Jonathan Edwards, a great forefather of the Evangelical movement, would be a proponent of this kind of gospel proclamation. After all, isn’t he best known for his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”?

1. Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 25–27.

While New Testament authors undoubtedly do use forensic and individual categories and the satisfaction of a holy God is an important strand of their soteriological thought, these categories are subservient to a much grander theme and more antecedent purpose. God's revelatory, saving purposes are first aesthetic—that is, they always result in the revelation (some Edwards scholars would say expansion) of divine beauty and glory. Second, this beauty originates in the harmony of the three Divine persons in communion and is enhanced by the coming into union of human persons with God, in God's Son and by God's Spirit. God viewed the eternal identity of humans not first as "sinners" but as person in communion with him, destined to become children in his family, the bride of the Son.² In short, the saving concerns of God are filial first and forensic second; the forensic is vacuous apart from the filial. The fulfilment of God's purposes for humanity can be summed up in the word *participation* (*koinonia*). God has come into creation through the Son to participate in humanity by the Spirit, in order that humans in Christ might participate in the divine love, life, and glory, by the Spirit. As such, God is concerned with persons and their participation in his life and love and glory.

Through the Son's participation in our humanity by the incarnation—and, consequently, in his vicarious life, death, and resurrection—God has indeed dealt with the forensics of sin and guilt. However, note that because of the manner in which it was effected, salvation is dependent on participation, beginning with God's participation in our humanity (the hypostatic union). Propitiation depends on participation, that is, Christ's full participation in humanity. Following our participation or union with Christ (*unio Christi*) by the Spirit, through regeneration,

2. This statement will be addressed further in a later discussion. Edwards maintains a particularistic view of election, whereas, this statement could be made by Barth without qualification.

appropriation takes place; we avail ourselves of the twin graces of justification and sanctification (the *duplex gratia*). Union with Christ, as Calvin emphatically notes, is logically prior to the twin graces; to use another term, it is prior to the forensics.

Furthermore, in participation with Christ by the Spirit, human persons participate together with other humans in God's grand narrative of creation, the fall, redemption of creation, and its consummation, in which all glory will redound to the triune God. Participation of being, that is, our union with Christ by the Spirit, leads to participation of doing. We participate in God's work in the world in relationship to God, our fellow humans, creation, and creation's *telos*, which is the glory of God.

In other words, the primary category for Christian soteriology is a relational one. The harmony, holiness, and happiness of the inherently personal, relational, and self-communicating triune God overflow into the creation and redemption of human persons created in God's image so that they may, in Christ, become one with God as sons and daughters. By participating in the harmony, holiness, and happiness of the Trinity, they fulfil their destiny as image bearers, stewarding creation in participation with God for the enhancement of the revealed glory of God. As wonderful as the justification, sanctification, vocation, and glorification of the people of God may be, these activities are a logical consequence of a greater theme—the prior love of a God who is love and who, in Christ, became one with humanity, desiring to bring human beings into union with himself through the Son, by the Spirit. While a Christian life lived well does not neglect the confession of sin and the lifestyle of repentance, it is, at its core, lived out within a series of loving, reverberating, and harmonious unions.

First, the Christian life originates out of the holy, loving, harmonious comm-*union* of the immanent Trinity, which overflows

(*ekstasis*) into the self-communication and self-giving acts of the economic Trinity in creation and in the giving of the incarnate Son through a union of the divine and human natures, that by his vicarious life and atoning death, he might enable believing fallen humans to be reconciled to God in union with him. This union becomes known in human experience through the giving of the regenerating and adoptive Spirit—the bond of love within the Trinity, the bond uniting the human and divine natures of Christ, and therefore, the bond between the Christian and God. Because it is shared with all other Christians, this union is also a loving union with the people of God, the church. It extends toward humanity in the mission of the church and then toward non-human creation, which itself already reverberates with a beauty that reflects its triune Creator. In the full renewal that accompanies the glorification of the children of God at the consummation of all things, creation will join the Bride of Christ in glorifying the Bridegroom—the Son—in a universe remanating back to the triune God the ever-expanding glory due him. This is, in fact, the gospel according to Jonathan Edwards.

Even with respect to the atonement of Christ, Edwards has an aesthetic and relational emphasis, distinct within his Puritan-Reformed heritage. As McClymond and McDermott state, “This return to Christ’s beauty is one of several ways that Edwards’ theology of the atonement differed from that of his predecessors.” Referring to the work of Steve Holmes, they suggest that “while the Western theological tradition had stressed the atonement as a legal transaction, and post-Reformation Protestants had emphasized the juridical and declarative dimensions, Edwards highlighted the aesthetic, rational, and personal aspects of the passion. Edwards’ mercantile metaphors—Christ purchasing heaven and the Holy Spirit for the elect—commonly appeared in the context of personal union with Christ through the indwelling Spirit.”³ Edwards sees the passion

event as the pinnacle and major part of Christ's atonement, the "brightest effulgence" of Christ's "beauty and amiable excellency."⁴ Much more than an abstract forensic negotiation with God, or even an act of obedience by which he fulfilled "Adam's part all over again,"⁵ it is an act of romantic love couched within the metaphor of Edwards's Bride-bridegroom *theosis*.⁶

The filial nature of the atonement is further evidenced in that the goal of the atonement is the infusion of the Gift of the Spirit, the Love of God, in regeneration. Even more important than the observation that the gospel of the filial, the aesthetic, and the doxological is the gospel according to Jonathan is that it is the gospel according to Jesus.

A Journey of Three Unions, with Johannine Precedent

The idea that the gospel involves discovering joyful union with the inner life and love of the Trinity gains its credibility from the ministry of Jesus as John describes it. At the heart of Jesus' passion discourse in John 14, he states: "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in Me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). By "on that day," Jesus means the day of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Through the indwelling of the Spirit, the disciples would be granted illumination to understand the three great unions of

3. Michael M. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 252, (hereafter referred to as McClymond and McDermott, 2012a). Here they are referencing the work of Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 143–48 (hereafter referred to as Holmes, 2001a).

4. Edwards, vol. 18 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. by Ava Chamberlain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 488 (hereafter all references to the 26 vol. Yale edition will be referred to as *YE*, vol. no.); *YE 10*, 539 cited in McClymond and McDermott, 2012a, 252. Edwards includes the incarnation and all of Christ's suffering in life as propitiatory but the cross as the principal way in which he merited heaven because of the fact that there he suffered more than in the rest of life (*YE 19*, 514).

5. Edwards, *YE 9*, 304–5.

6. Edwards, *YE 13*, 332, 390.

Christian theology and find themselves participating in or receiving the benefits of those unions. Moreover, they would grasp the crucial part the Spirit plays in each of these unions. The richness of Jonathan Edwards's theology can be encapsulated within the richness of the three unions of the gospel as expressed in this Johannine text.

By beginning to grasp the union of the Persons of the Father and the Son in the Spirit, the disciples would obtain a new way of thinking about the one God they knew as Yahweh. Second, by gaining insight into the reality that they were "in Christ" (reflected in Jesus' phrase "in Me"), they would realize that He who had walked among them as their Master was, in fact, the fully Divine Son of Yahweh who had entered fully into humanity to become its new representative, the *eschatos* Adam, as a fully human and fully Divine person. They would understand that they were "in Christ" because Christ had become one with them. After his resurrection, they would construct the doctrine of the incarnation in retrospect, realizing that this had happened at the moment of his birth on earth (the moment of the incarnation), which they knew had been enacted by the brooding work of the Holy Spirit. Third, they would realize on the Day of Pentecost the import of the words, "I am in you." That is, the incarnation and the Son's being and acting on behalf of the humanity he had assumed—his vicarious life, death, resurrection, and ascension—prepared the way for God to actually indwell his believing people by the giving of the Gift of the Holy Spirit. They were not merely to be forgiven sinners; they were to become God's habitation, his saints, the Bride of the Son. By that Gift of the Spirit, Christ would, by means of the *perichoresis* of the Divine persons of the Trinity, also indwell his people. As Paul later says, the Spirit is, after all, "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9). The context of the verse in John 14 also makes this abundantly clear. First, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to ask the Father to give them the "other advocate,"

the “Spirit of truth”; the One who is presently *with* them will soon be *in* them (vv. 16–17). In verse 18, Jesus states, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” This “coming” is, quite clearly, not a reference to his second coming but to the imminent coming of the Spirit, poured out as the Gift of the Father after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, to make Christ present in them.

The two great Christological and participational movements reflected in the phrases “You are in me” and “I am in you” are expressed in Pauline language by the prepositional phrases that express the very heart of the gospel: “in Christ” (ninety times) and “Christ in you” (see Col. 1:27). In his second epistle, Peter expresses them in his own way. The second union, the “Christ in us” reality, is reflected by a Petrine phrase that has become the celebrated text of participation theology (2 Pet. 1:4). Peter speaks of believers as those who “participate in the divine nature” (NIV) or who are made “partakers of the divine nature” (NASB, KJV). However, this reality is only a possibility—first, because of the prior participation of the Son in our humanity and his vicarious righteousness and second, for those who have availed themselves of it by believing the promises of the gospel. In verse 1, he speaks of the participants in the divine nature as “those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours” (2 Pet. 1:1).

Post-Apostolic Development

With regard to the union of the Son with humanity, the church formed by these apostles would one day articulate the doctrine of the hypostatic union with the careful language of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. However, the full legacy of the apostles to whom Jesus spoke these words—ultimately expressed to the apostolic

community, the church—involves the articulation that two great movements enable human beings to become one with God. First, God the Son became one with us so that, second, we might become one with Him. That is, two movements involve union, or participation. First, God has come into union (participating fully) in our humanity by the incarnation; and second, by the Spirit’s wooing, regeneration, and incorporation of humans, he brings them into union or participation with God by faith. A few generations after the apostles, one member of the apostolic community, Athanasius (296–373 C.E.), became the great defender of the full deity of Christ, expressing this truth in a startling way: “For God became man so that men might become a god.”⁷ While this might sound misleading to our modern Western ears—tantamount to monism or Mormonism and maybe even a threat to monotheism or divine simplicity—this is not what Athanasius means. Rather, “becoming a god” means to share in the divine nature, to be a child of God, to participate in an I-Thou relationship with God. Similarly, Irenaeus’ reflections on theosis have been summed up in the words, “if the Word has been made man, it is so that men may become gods.”⁸ By this, Irenaeus means that as a result of the incarnation of the Son, humans can become sons and daughters of God, partakers of the divine nature; though ontologically distinct from God, they share in the essence of God’s love. John of Damascus describes this as the image of God being restored in redeemed humans so that they might become “partakers of divinity” without ceasing to be human.⁹ Thus, participation does not make us less, but more human. Basil the Great,

7. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54:3 (PG 25:192B).

8. These words are actually those of Vladimir Lossky, in his summation of Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses V*. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 134.

9. John of Damascus, *An Exposition of The Orthodox Faith* 4:4, 2:12, 3:18, 20, www.newadvent.org/fathers/33044.htm.

one of the Cappadocian Fathers, speaks of the importance of the Holy Spirit in the process of divinization when he says: “Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God; indeed, we attain what is beyond our most sublime aspirations—we become God.”¹⁰ Basil does not mean that the church becomes a fourth person of the Trinity but that we are in relational union, of one family with God, sharing his energies rather than his essence.

In a similar vein, John Meyendorff summarizes the work of arguably the greatest Orthodox theologian of deification, St. Maximus the Confessor, by defining the concept known as *theosis* (or deification) as “total participation in Jesus Christ.”¹¹ This rendering remains truest to the original expression of John 14:20. Maximus is sensitive to the issue of the ontological boundary between God and humans, which is reflected in his statement, “All that God is except for an identity in being, one becomes when one is deified by grace.”¹² Maximus distinguishes between the unknowable essence and the energies of God while stressing that the energies are not thereby less than God. Rather, they are “God, not lessened, but freely revealed.”¹³ The Orthodox do not believe that distinguishing between the essence and energies of God is a denial of the simplicity of God. In the Orthodox tradition, the energies represent that which God in freedom chooses to reveal of himself, and the participation of the church in the energies is understood as a miracle of God’s free grace. Maximus is most notable for the manner in which he addresses the problem of participation, blurring the categories of God and humanity by paralleling the participation of God in humanity in the incarnation of the Son and the participation of humanity

10. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, Cap. 9, 23 (PG 32:107–110).

11. John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 39 (hereafter referred to as, Meyendorff, 1974a).

12. Maximus, *Book of Antiquities*, 41 (PG 91:1308).

13. Meyendorff, 1974a, 39.

in God. As we evaluate Edwards’s version of *theosis*, we shall see the importance of keeping these unions together. By borrowing from Cyrilline Christology, Maximus represents the “unconfused *perichoretic* union” of the divine and human natures of Christ, which serves as a prototype or apologetic for the “unconfused *perichoretic* union” that will take place between the cosmos and God through humanity’s “unconfused *perichoretic* union” with God. As Clement Wen notes:

Whereas Christ’s divinity *theandrically* experienced *humanization*, Christ’s humanity *theandrically* experienced the *deification* upon which *all deification*, before or after Him, would find its base. Thus, Maximus wrote that: “[Christ] acts *theandrically*, being at the same time both God and man, sufferings showing that he is what we have become, *and by performing wonders demonstrating to us what we are to become*.” It is in this sense, then, that Elena Vishnevskaya can say of Maximus’ theology that: “The *perichoresis* of God and the believer . . . has its prototype in the *perichoresis* of the hypostatic union in the person of the Logos.”¹⁴

The ecclesial nature of the humanity that participates in God and the humanization that is the *telos* of Maximus’ version of participation—including its cosmic consequences (the human as the image of God is the link between God and creation)—provide an interesting grid for comparative evaluation of participation in Jonathan Edwards. Maximus also sought to overcome the problem of participation with his doctrine of the Logos and the *logoi* (the “participatable” attributes of Christ), which demonstrate a Neoplatonic influence in his thought. Therefore, Maximus’s understanding of participation (μέθεξις) may be assessed as a participation in the eternal realities of God rather than a participation

14. Clement Wen, “The Monergistic Theme of Participation in the Anthropological Soteriology of John Calvin: A Dialogue with Maximus the Confessor,” MCS thesis, Regent College, 2011, 34 (hereafter referred to as Wen 2011a), emphasis mine.

in God's eternal Triune personal relationships (that is, participation as *κοινωνία*).¹⁵ Nevertheless, Maximus sought to answer the problem of participation christologically, which led Torstein Tollefsen to label Maximus's participatory Logos-*logoi* a "Christocentric cosmology"; Christ was Maximus's ultimate answer to the problem of participation.¹⁶

All of these Church Fathers understood that the gospel's first concern is not sin-management. Rather, it is about persons becoming members of the family of God, indwelt by God, dwelling in God. It is filial first and forensic second. Edwards' shared this conviction, even if his construction of *theosis* is, as we will discover, differently nuanced. For Edwards, as for the Eastern theologians, God's first thoughts are for the persons of human creation and their sharing in his image and divine nature. While God certainly atones for and forgives their sins, this is a penultimate act—the preparation for the more wonderful reality of inhabiting humanity. In Edwards's thinking, even in the human aspect of receiving salvation—that is, the exercise of faith that signals our justification—the prior work of the Spirit regenerates our dead souls and brings us into union with Christ.

In a specifically Trinitarian context, Edwards references our key verse, John 14:20, towards the end of entry 104 as a verse that contains concepts with wide influence in the whole of Scriptural revelation: "Many other of Christ's speeches may receive light from hence, the meaning of the apostle John's Gospel and Epistles,

15. See Wen, 2011a, 11. See Julie Canlis's summary of the difference between *μέθεξις* and *κοινωνία* in *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1–24 (hereafter referred to as Canlis, 2010a); also Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, *Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91–103, 142–43; and Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 153–215.

16. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii, cited in Wen, 2011a, 36.

particularly, and many passages throughout the whole Bible.” He then expostulates in a corollary comment, “how great is the gospel that reveals to us such things.”¹⁷ Along with verses 21 and 23, Edwards cites verse 20 again in an exposition of John 16:27: “No, the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” To explain the sentiment that love is included in saving faith, Edwards appeals to the union of the disciples with Christ as the soteriological category that logically precedes both faith and love contained within it (just as Calvin does). “But this, in general, is what Christ would signify to them” says Edwards, “*viz.* that the Father loved them because of their union to him, and so he loved them for his sake.”¹⁸ In other words, neither justifying faith nor the corresponding affection of love are possible apart from the Spirit’s prior regenerating work, by which God draws converting sinners into union with Christ.

This conclusion is borne out by the fact that the realities of the unions and the disciples’ perception of them, as expressed in John 14:20, is made possible only because the Spirit is given, which the antecedent context of this verse reveals. Edwards refers to this context in the *Religious Affections* as he explains the coming into union of converting people with the triune God.

The Spirit of God is given to the true saints to dwell in them, as his proper lasting abode; and to influence their hearts, as a principle of new nature, or as a divine supernatural spring of life and action. The Scriptures represent the Holy Spirit, not only as moving, and occasionally influencing the saints, but as dwelling in them as his temple, his proper abode, and everlasting dwelling place (*I Corinthians 3:16, II Corinthians 6:16, John 14:16–17*). And he is represented as being there so united to the faculties of the soul, that he becomes there a principle or spring of new nature and life . . . (Gal. . .) The Spirit of God so dwells

17. *YE 13*, 274.

18. *YE 24*, pt. 2, 957.

in the hearts of the saints, that he there, as a seed or spring of life, exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship *with* the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ, in thus having the communion or participation *of* the Holy Ghost.¹⁹

Prior even to the union work of the Spirit in our own personal histories, another union exists—a union even more fundamental to our salvation—the union between God the Son and humanity by the incarnation (one that we shall discover Edwards might have emphasized more). God has inhabited humanity *for* all humanity, (and still does) in Christ by the Spirit, so that we might be inhabited by Christ, through the Spirit, as persons in community with his church.

Five Key Participational Issues

In our assessment of Edwards's Trinitarian theology, we will be alert to three issues, among others. First, we will note how much the theme of union or participation pervades his understanding of the gospel. Second, we will notice the extent to which he understands, expounds, and defends the role of the Holy Spirit in each of the three unions; and third, we will note and assess the relative emphases he places upon the two participational movements: the movement of the Son who became one with us and the movement by which we find that Christ inhabits us through the working of the Spirit. The first—though enabled by the Spirit who effected the hypostatic union and empowered the human Jesus in his life and death and resurrection—primarily concerns the Son; hence, it is essentially

19. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections In Three Parts* in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.toc.html>), Part III, Section 1, 265.

christological. The second, though it makes real the presence of the Son in us, deals with the regenerating, incorporating, and sanctifying work of the Spirit, making it primarily pneumatological. *The relative weighting given in our theology to each of these soteriological, participational movements has certain profound consequences for various aspects of our salvation, that of the whole of humanity, and all of creation.* Consonant with his views of the covenants of grace and redemption, as well as a particularist view of election, we shall find that Edwards has a tendency to weigh the second over the first. Barth, on the other hand, weighs the first over the second, concluding that God, who loves in freedom, engages in a covenanting first and foremost for creation and humanity in the incarnate Son.

Two further issues relate to a theology of participation and must therefore be asked of Edwards: Is participation material (*methexis*) or merely related to persons (*koinōnia*)? Is the nature of participation monergistic, synergistic, or compatibilist? The first of these issues will be introduced in the following chapter. With respect to the second, Edwards and Barth share the Augustinian conviction that the human agent is active, not passive, in sanctification, even though God is the initiator and its prime agent. This occurs in a manner that permits God's working and our working together, such that in His working we work, and in our working he works. In both Edwards and Barth, this compatibilism is asymmetric in the sense that God is the prime mover. In other words, it is a liberating and empowering compatibilism (but not synergism²⁰)—an outworking of the relating of human persons in the fullness of their humanness

20. Julie Canlis, by way of an e-mail to a student (Clement Wen) whose thesis on participation in Calvin and Maximus we jointly supervised (Feb. 18, 2009), expresses the difference between synergism and participation in this way: "Synergism is cooperation—like a bargain. (At least, in my theological term books it is). Participation is more of an overlapping, an ensconcing, a vine-and-branches kind of thing. Part of the reason we don't go for it is that we have a modern, atomistic anthropology that doesn't make room for this kind of 'in-ness.' So we call it synergism, and know we don't like it!"

with Divine persons, in whom they are ensconced, without the confusion or coalescing of human and Divine persons. As Julie Canlis comments with respect to Calvin's participatory understanding of anthropology and the participational nature of the image of God in humanity: "God does not give us things that would then function without him; their very character demands communion."²¹ Here, the point is that genuine human functions exist, and they do not function without His functioning. For Calvin and for Barth, it seems clear that participation of humans in Christ makes humans more human. For Edwards, this conclusion is not always as clear, as we shall see. However, with respect to asymmetric compatibility between divine and human action, concord exists.

Another way to view the gospel is to notice that the three great stated unions of John 14:20 find a parallel in the language of the new covenant, which is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. The "I am in my Father" realization of John 14:20a answers to the "I am the Lord your God" or "the LORD our God, the LORD is one" declarations that begin covenantal expressions in the Old Testament (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6, 6:4; Ezek. 36:23). Next, the "you are in Me" realization of John 14:20b is very much akin to the "I will be your God" bedrock assertion of the new covenant (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). Finally, the "I am in you" realization of John 14:20c corresponds similarly to the three parts of the new covenant: "they will be my people," "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10), and "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you . . . I will put my Spirit in You and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezek. 36:26-28). Purves refers to the latter two declarations of the new covenant in this way: the "I will be your God" grace indicative of the

21. Canlis, 2010a, 78.

new covenant is accompanied by the “you will be my people” grace imperative.²²

Jesus’ summary of the gospel as contained in the three great unions of John 14:20—each of which is elucidated by the coming of the Spirit and in some way enabled by the Spirit, as contextualized within the biblical revelation—becomes a good framework for guiding us in our journey with Edwards and beyond. Not only do the three unions feature significantly in his theology and soteriology, but in each case, Edwards places a significant emphasis on the Spirit and states a desire to honor the Spirit. That is to say, Edwards understands the Trinity as a union of the Father and the Son *in* the Spirit, who is the nexus of the Trinity. Furthermore, Edwards’s understanding of the creation of the human nature of the Son and its union with his divine nature in the incarnation is dominated by the Spirit (like Edwards’s Christology in general). In his treatment of the union of the people with God—in Christ, by the Spirit—in conversion and sanctification, the “by the Spirit” dynamic is emphatic (perhaps overly so). Therefore, these unions will guide our consideration of the theme of participation in the theology of Jonathan Edwards.

Restoring the Center

To express the purpose of this book in another way, its intention is to restore the Trinity to the center of Christian thinking, worship, spirituality, and ethics in some small way. If the journey of three unions is anything, it is a journey into a gospel that is the

22. Andrew Purves reflects Karl Barth’s reference to these covenantal affirmations in his discussion of justification and sanctification in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, pt. 1, 2nd ed., eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 3ff (hereafter referred to as *CD*, vol./pt.). He goes on to speak of how Barth also spoke of the implication that “God with us” means “us with God.” Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 14ff.

Trinity—the Trinity in being, the Trinity in action. In a word, it is Trinitarian. An abundance of evidence supports Edwards’s understanding of the Trinity as the beginning and ending and “in between” of Christian theology and life. In one of his notebook entries called *Miscellany 181*, Edwards speaks about his change of mind with respect to the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity in regard to theology, spiritual life, and ethical living. “I used to think sometimes with myself, if such doctrines as those of the Trinity” are “true, yet what need was there of revealing them in the gospel? What good do they do towards the advancing of holiness?” But “now I don’t wonder at all at their being revealed, for such doctrines as these are glorious inlets into the knowledge and view of the spiritual world, and the contemplation of supreme things; the knowledge of which I have experienced how much contributes to the betterment of the heart.”²³ Later in entry 343, he states that “the revelation we now have of the Trinity,” which he considers to be the chief doctrine of the faith, makes “a vast alteration with respect to the reason and obligations to many amiable and exalted duties, so that they are as it were new.”²⁴ In 1740, he wrote retrospectively of his conversions, by which he gained a “new sense” of “the glory of the divine being” as specifically involving the Trinity: “God has appeared more glorious to me, on account of the Trinity . . . it has made me have more exalting thoughts of God, that he subsists as three persons; Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”²⁵

Danaher expresses most eloquently the place that the Trinity occupies in Edwards’s entire theological account when he draws attention to the short resolution Edwards made as he drafted an outline for a proposed treatise of philosophical theology entitled “A

23. *YE 13*, 328.

24. *YE 13*, 416.

25. *YE 16*, 800. The compilation of these quotations and others can be found in Danaher, 2004a, 5.

Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion”: “to explain the doctrine of the Trinity before I begin to treat of the work of redemption; and of their equality, their equal honour in their manner of subsisting and acting, and virtue. But to speak of their equal honour in their concern in the affair of redemption afterwards, after I have done with all the doctrines relating to man’s redemption.”²⁶ Danaher adds that although “Edwards never completed the treatise, the place he assigned to explaining the doctrine of the Trinity is striking. Not only does the Trinity precede all discussion of the work of redemption, which in ‘Miscellany’ entry 702 Edwards describes as the ‘great end and drift of all God’s works and dispensations’ (Y18:284), but all reflection on the work of redemption culminates in a reconsideration of the Trinity. In short, Edwards envisioned the doctrine of the Trinity as the alpha and omega of the ‘Rational Account.’”²⁷

Just how that journey from alpha to omega with the Trinity works out will be revealed by exploration of the three unions. However, it consists of a journey in which *the* union—that is, the Trinity itself, the Union of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit—is preeminent and determinative.

One of Edwards’s chief contributions that lives on in healthier versions of Evangelical Christianity and piety is the validation of the immediacy and the experiential nature of true Christianity through the portrayal of a robust, lively, and loving subjectivity, which is grounded in the indwelling of the Spirit in believers. Edwards achieves subjectivity without becoming the victim of subjectivism in the way typified by Schleiermacher, for example. Edwards’s spirituality of the heart is grounded within an equally robust theology

26. *YE* 6, 396.

27. Danaher, 2004a, 5.

of the mind and his acknowledgement of objective revelation in Christ and through the Scriptures.

Nevertheless (as previously mentioned), I will contend that this, his greatest strength, opened up his greatest liability, insofar that his emphasis on Spirit participation of the saints needs an equally robust doctrine of the incarnational participation of Christ in humanity. Thus, I will bring him into dialogue with Karl Barth, the theologian of participation in Christ (fully recognizing that both are reliant on more ancient forms of the doctrine in the tradition), with a view to arriving at a theology and praxis of sanctification that avoids the pitfalls of anthropocentric and synergistic versions on the one hand and smug nominalist and passivistic interpretations on the other.

The contexts of these theologians are significantly different. Since this is a theological study as opposed to a historical one, we will not focus heavily on the historical contexts of the two theologians. Yet each is a product of his time, and their respective theologies are a result of contextualization of the faith in their own culture and settings. If Edwards seems overly subjective at times, we can attribute this to the fact that his pastoral burden was not principally to assist parishioners to move beyond medieval Catholicism (as it was for the Reformers) or to counter the anthropocentric subjectivism of liberalism (as it was for Barth) but to help those in the state-church he served to understand the nature of “true,” vital religion (as distinguished from nominal faith) and to distinguish between true and false signs of Spirit-life manifest in revivals. To say that the contemporary church is in need of such a revival today is to massively understate the case.

To whet the appetite, we anticipate a journey in which we will uncover in Edwards a delightful doctrine of *theosis* in which sanctification is seen as a participation in the love and life and beauty of God, especially as this is brought about by the immediacy of

the presence and life of the Spirit—that is, the mutual love of the Father for the Son, to the believer. We will discover, however, that Edwards’s pastoral emphasis on regeneration and sanctification by the Spirit does, at times, overshadow justification in Christ in ways that Barth’s christological participation emphasis might have counterbalanced. Taken together, the participation theologies of Edwards and Barth result in a joyful and lively Christian life, grounded on justification in Christ and empowered by sanctification in the Spirit as a consequence of being ensconced within Christ by the Spirit. Together, they inspire us towards a life of contemplative communion with God—a pursuit of repentance and holiness in an evangelical way that is motivated by, and secure in, a righteousness already accomplished for us in the One who stands in our place, One who enables our responses and continues to be *for us* as our Great High priest at the right hand of the Father, as well as *in us* by the Spirit.

Let us hope that our journey into the participation theology of Edwards and beyond will make us more doxological, more dependent, more diligent disciples of Jesus Christ—that we will be realistically progressive but not smug or triumphalistic with regard to transformation in the journey in this life. We may hope to be disciples who, in the “now” phase of their journey, are becoming more fully human insofar as they are, by contemplative communion with Christ, becoming image bearers progressively imbued with divine likeness and glory—disciples living in the great hope of the “not yet” phase of their journey, a time when they shall be beatified by the vision of the majesty of the all-glorious triune God of grace and glory.²⁸

28. This phrase is a deliberate reflection of Steve Holmes summary description of Edwards’s God in his excellent work, *God of Grace and God of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). I owe a debt to Steve for the generous sharing of his insights on Edwards early in my PhD research, which included a manuscript of his book.