

WHAT IS A PERSON? THREE ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR JONATHAN EDWARDS'S DOCTRINE OF PERSONHOOD

OBBIE TYLER TODD*

Abstract: *Jonathan Edwards's Trinitarianism and soteriology were bridged by his doctrine of personhood. In defining personhood, Edwards operated under three essential theological criteria. Edwardsean personhood was relational, reflexive, and redemptive. It is the aim of this article to elucidate Edwards's Trinitarianism by unpacking these three axioms of personhood and how they influenced his particular view of redemption and the Christian life.*

Key words: *person, personhood, Trinity, reflexive, relational, redemptive, self*

In recent years within evangelical scholarship, “America’s theologian” Jonathan Edwards has been the subject of criticism concerning his view of divine and human personhood.¹ Oliver Crisp, for example, has labeled Edwards a panentheist due to his view that God is “in effect, Being in general.”² Edwards’s doctrine of “emanation” and “reemanation” in *The End for which God Created the World* (1765) has prompted some to place him in the Neo-Platonist camp.³ Conversely, another has called his view of material creation a “failure” due to an alleged exaltation of rational humanity.⁴ These criticisms have only been compounded by Edwards’s subscription (though not exclusively) to an Augustinian psychological model of the Trinity that upheld the Holy Spirit as personified divine love. To many it seems that Edwards’s metaphysical theology often obscured the line between Creator and creature, person and property. In order to better understand his views on such doctrines as the Trinity, creation, morality, and conversion, Edwards’s doctrine of personhood deserves examination. This paper will contend that the doctrine of personhood provides a theological bridge between Edwards’s Trinitarianism and his soteriology, his idealism and his “dispositional ontology.”⁵ In order to demonstrate

* Obbie Tyler Todd is pastor at the Church at Haynes Creek, 1242 Mt. Zion Road, Oxford, GA 30054. He is a doctoral student in theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 3939 Gentilly Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70126. He may be contacted at obbiett@gmail.com.

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

² Oliver Crisp, “Jonathan Edwards’ Panentheism,” in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary: Essays in Honor of Sang Hyun Lee* (ed. Don Schweitzer; New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 107–25.

³ Robert C. Whittemore, *The Transformation of the New England Theology* (American University Studies Series; New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 56. See also Whittemore’s article, “Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of the Sixth Way,” *CH* 35 (1966): 60–75.

⁴ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “*The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 132.

⁵ Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (exp. ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

this bridge, Edwardsean personhood will be minimally defined as (1) relational, (2) reflexive, (3) and redemptive. Each of these three basic criteria will be explored in detail.

In his “Miscellanies,” Jonathan Edwards provocatively claimed, “I am not afraid to say twenty things about the Trinity which the Scripture never said.”⁶ For Edwards, this included attributing personhood to the triune God. Edwards conceded, “I believe that we have no word in the English language that does so naturally represent what the Scripture reveals of the distinction of the Eternal Three—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—as to say they are one God and three persons.”⁷ This paper will seek to elucidate Edwards’s Trinitarian logic by locating the common personal characteristics that Edwards ascribed to both God and man, beginning with the “subterranean river” that flowed underneath his entire theology: his Trinitarianism.⁸

I. RELATIONAL PERSONHOOD

Jonathan Edwards believed that no reasonable being could live joyfully without fellowship and society with others. Therefore, to be a person—human or divine—is to be a social being. The community desired by human persons is, by design, only a shadow of the splendid fellowship enjoyed eternally by the divine Persons of the Godhead. Humans are created to be in relation with one another and with God, just as God is in perpetual relation with himself. According to Edwards,

One alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent; for in such case there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore, no such thing as consent. Indeed, what we call “one” may be excellent, because of a consent of parts, or some consent of those in that being that are distinguished into a plurality some way or other. But in a being that is absolutely without plurality there cannot be excellency, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement.⁹

The Trinity is where Edwards found supreme “excellency” in plurality: three divine Persons consenting and agreeing perfectly with one another in eternal delight. This Edwardsean notion of “consent of parts” was, in some ways, a new take

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “The ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 94,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* (hereafter *WJE Online*), vol. 13, *The “Miscellanies,” Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500* (ed. Harry S. Stout; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 257.

⁷ References to two of Edwards’s major writings on the Trinity, “Treatise on Grace” and “Discourse on the Trinity,” will be taken from Paul Helm, ed., *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings Including Observations on the Trinity* (Greenwood, SC: Attie, 1971), 57 (henceforth, Helm, *Trinity*). The North African Church Father Tertullian (AD 155–240) is traditionally considered to have been the first to coin the word “Trinity,” along with the dictum that the triune God is “one substance” and “three persons.”

⁸ Paww, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 3.

⁹ Sereno Edwards Dwight, “Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards,” in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Edward Hickman; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1:cclxxi. Subsequent references will be indicated by *Works*, followed by volume and page number.

on the individualism of the Enlightenment.¹⁰ For Edwards, excellency and beauty were near-synonyms expressing the same reality.¹¹ Both were grounded in relationality. Like notes in a melody or petals on a flower, true beauty is found in symmetry and proportion. Yet this kind of “secondary beauty” found in nature is only a “type” and “shadow” of primary spiritual beauty. The latter is accessible only by the light of the Holy Spirit, who gives “the new spiritual sense or the sense which apprehends the beauty and moral excellence of divine things.”¹² Thus, in many ways, conversion was for Edwards a discovery of real fellowship, harmony, and the beauty therein.

In *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards*, Roland Delattre defines beauty in three primary ways: objective, structural, and relational. All three are found supremely in God, “the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.”¹³ Delattre contends, “Nothing is rightly known until its beauty (or deformity) is known, and nothing is adequately known until its beauty is sensibly (rather than notionally) known.”¹⁴ Therefore to know God is to know his beauty, and to know his beauty is to know him triune by the Spirit of God.¹⁵ Consequently, when Edwards refers to people as “intelligent beings” in *The Nature of True Virtue*, it is not a singular faculty that designates personhood, but the capacity for “uniting, consent, or propensity to Being.”¹⁶ Edwardsean personhood, and hence Edwardsean ethics, is deeply relational.

For this reason, Amy Plantinga Pauw has described Edwards’s new concept of being as a “relational ontology.”¹⁷ Rejecting the idea that Edwards held to the scholastic doctrine of divine simplicity, Pauw avers, “Edwards’s metaphysics, like this theology, is more a connected set of miscellaneous reflections than an internally consistent whole. What holds it together is the conviction that relationality is at

¹⁰ Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) posited a similar view of beauty. According to Norman Fiering, “Hutcheson’s hypothesis that beauty is essentially uniformity amidst variety was not rejected by Edwards, but Edwards subsumed this idea under his own broader law of consent or agreement.” *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 113.

¹¹ Speaking on Edwards’s concept of reality, Wilson H. Kinnach posits, “Reality itself is a matter of perceived relationship.” See “Jonathan Edwards’ Pursuit of Reality,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 111.

¹² *Works*, “Editor’s Introduction,” 32.

¹³ *Works*, 1:125.

¹⁴ Roland Andre Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 50.

¹⁵ Edwards even contended that within the regenerate Christian was a new “trinity, an image of the eternal Trinity; wherein Christ is the everlasting father, and believers are his seed, and the Holy Spirit, or Comforter, is the third person in Christ, being his delight and love flowing out towards the church” (“Miscellanies,” no. 104, *WJE Online*, 13:273).

¹⁶ *Works*, 1:123.

¹⁷ Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 58. Michael McClymond likens Pauw’s view to Lee’s “dispositional ontology,” remarking, “the Lee-Pauw perspective sees Edwards’ God as dynamic, relational, expansive, and pluralistic” (“Hearing the Symphony,” in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, 68).

the heart of metaphysical excellence.”¹⁸ Distancing himself from the scholastic theologians of his Puritanical tradition, Edwards thought less in terms of properties and more in terms of persons. His Trinitarianism was ubiquitous in his thought, even when not explicit. However, Edwards did not hold exclusively to one particular strain of Trinitarian theology, prompting Pauw to label it an “eclectic synthesis” and a “cobbled” mix.¹⁹ Although, as will be shown, Edwards also held to an Augustinian view of the Trinity, he was unafraid to blend this psychological view with a particularly social, Cappadocian model that emphasized the relationality between the divine Persons. In *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, William J. Danaher Jr. examines Edwards’s ratiocination behind his “eclectic synthesis” of Eastern and Western traditions:

The second reason that Edwards’s social analogy does not degenerate into tritheism is that he believes that the psychological and social analogies provide complementary, rather than alternative, accounts of the Trinity. Therefore, the emphasis that the social analogy places on the individuality and agency of the divine persons is balanced by the emphasis that the psychological analogy places on the perichoretic unity and identity of the divine nature.²⁰

In short, Edwards believed that the social model of the Trinity offered a particularly *personal* perspective of the Godhead in a way that Augustine’s psychological model traditionally did not. It afforded Edwards the license to refer to the Trinity as an “eternal society” or “family” in the Godhead.²¹ Edwards’s social Trinity also fit nicely into his idea of an eternal covenant of redemption between the Father and Son, wherein the Father’s aim for salvation “was to procure a spouse or a mystical body for his Son.”²² At times Edwards’s language for the Trinity is so humanlike that it borders on the domestic, owing greatly to Edwards’s doctrine of personhood—a particularly relational personhood. For Edwards, a tendency for communion was part of the image of God:

No reasonable creature can be happy ... without society and communion, not only because he finds something in others that is not in himself, but because he delights to communicate himself to another. This cannot be because of our imperfection, but because we are made in the image of God; for the more perfect any creature is, the more strong this inclination. ... Jehovah’s happiness consists in communion, as well as the creature’s.²³

God’s proclivity for communication is a function of his relational nature. Echoing one of the central themes in *The End for which God Created the World*, Edwards sug-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁹ Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 183.

²⁰ William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Columbia Series in Reformed Theology; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 108.

²¹ *Works*, 2:628.

²² Jonathan Edwards, “The ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 1245,” in *WJE Online*, vol. 23, *The “Miscellanies,” 1153–1360* (ed. Douglas A. Sweeney; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 178.

²³ “Miscellanies,” no. 96, *WJE Online*, 13:264.

gests in the Miscellanies that it is more than a proclivity; it is a necessity of glory: "God glorifies himself toward the creatures also two ways: (1) by appearing to them, being manifested to their understandings; (2) in communicating himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying the manifestations which he makes of himself."²⁴ Therefore, like the Creator whose image they bear, human persons are also communicative beings. William J. Danaher is correct in his assertion that "for Edwards, personhood is a concept one develops 'from above' rather than 'from below.'"²⁵ Self-knowledge begins with the revealed knowledge of God. With the common doctrine of personhood, Edwardsean Trinitarianism informed Edwardsean anthropology.

Yet another corollary to Jonathan Edwards's acutely relational definition of personhood is the concept of union. Personhood is not simply communicative; it is also unitive. This is perhaps where Edwards's doctrine of love is most vivid; love desires union. According to the Northampton pastor, there were three fundamental unions: the union of the persons of the Trinity, the union of God and humanity in the incarnate Christ, and the union of believers with God and with one another. All three were forged by the Holy Spirit between persons or between natures in a person. Therefore Edwards's concept of spiritual union was exclusively personal. In fact, as Pauw observes, "Edwards's most fundamental theological rationale for speaking of *persons* in God was the aptness of that vocabulary for expressing trinitarian love."²⁶ There was a particularly "personal" element to Edwards's idea of love, so much indeed that he was even willing to identify divine love as the Holy Spirit himself.²⁷

According to Norman Fiering, "In interpreting Edwards' thought one must always begin with his concept of love."²⁸ This is also true in exploring his doctrine of personhood. To many, Edwards's equivalence of the Holy Spirit with divine love seems to depersonalize the third person of the Godhead into an inanimate kind of energy or force.²⁹ After all, is the Spirit not more than simply a "bond" of love? However, Edwards's deeply relational definition of personhood suggests the exact opposite: the identification of the Holy Spirit as divine love is instead a dignifying,

²⁴ "Miscellanies," no. 448, *WJE Online*, 13:495.

²⁵ Danaher, *Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 66.

²⁶ Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 76.

²⁷ According to Edwards, the Holy Spirit "is often spoken of as a person, revealed under personal characters and in personal acts, and it speaks of His being acted on as a person, and the Scripture plainly ascribes every thing to Him that properly denotes a distinct person" (Helm, *Trinity*, 91).

²⁸ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 126.

²⁹ Even Augustine conceded the obvious fact that Scripture "has not said that the Holy Spirit is love; had it done so, it would have removed no small part of this problem" (*Saint Augustine: The Trinity* [trans. Stephen McKenna; FC 45; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963], 491–492 [15.17.27]).

personalizing action on the part of Edwards, “the theologian of the great commandment.”³⁰

II. REFLEXIVE PERSONHOOD

The second criterion for Edwardsean personhood is an extension of the first. Edwards defined persons in terms of self-consciousness. Therefore, the reflexive nature of personhood is, in some ways, a relation to oneself. Edwards saw this most notably in the triune God. Fused with the social model, Edwards’s psychological view of the Trinity followed Augustine’s analogy of the memory, intellect, and will of a human being.³¹ This is the traditional Trinitarian view adopted in one form or another by the Western church.³² The Son of God is the Father’s perfect idea of himself, and this divine reflexive knowledge then generates God’s infinite love for and delight in himself, which is the Holy Spirit.³³ For Edwards, the Son of God isn’t simply a representation of the Father, but rather “there must be a duplicity” within the mind of God.³⁴ God’s idea of himself is necessarily perfect, and therefore this divine idea must be equal and identical to the God that conceives it. Hence the Son is both one with and distinct from the Father. According to Edwards, “Thus that which proceeds from God *ad extra* is agreeable to the twofold subsistences which proceed from him *ad intra*, which is the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Son being the idea of God or the knowledge of God, and the Holy Ghost which is the love of God and joy in God.”³⁵ Within this psychological matrix, Christ is the wisdom of God, and the Spirit is the love of God.

As mentioned earlier, Edwards’s Trinitarianism has been the subject of debate in recent scholarly circles. However, the fact that Edwards consistently employed the psychological analogy in some way is indubitable. Edwards’s provisional notes in the *Miscellanies* (especially 94, 181, 308, 702, and 1062), his manuscript “On the Equality of the Persons of the Trinity,” and his “Discourse on the Trinity” bear this out ostensibly. As Ross Hastings asserts, “Edwards’ favored model when it comes to the workings of the Trinity to effect human redemption is without doubt,

³⁰ Joseph G. Haroutunian, “Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Great Commandment,” *TbTo* 1 (1944–1945): 361–62.

³¹ According to Jaroslav Pelikan, “As the foundation for Augustine’s speculations about the trinitarian structure of the mind was the biblical plural, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,’ so it was also the idea of creation in the image of God. Every creature of God reflected to some degree the nature of the Creator.” *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 3: *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 260.

³² For example, in Anselm’s *Monologion*, the theologian states plainly, “For there is no reason to deny that when a rational mind thinks and understands itself, an image of itself is produced in its thought.” *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

³³ In *The Trinity*, Augustine noted a triad of “the lover, what is being loved, and love” (*Trinity*, 255 [8.5.14]).

³⁴ Paul Helm has accused Edwards of ditheism regarding this exact point (“The Human Self and the Divine Trinity,” in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, 98).

³⁵ “Miscellanies,” no. 1218, *WJE Online*, 23:153.

the psychological Trinity.”³⁶ Unlike John Calvin who found “no solidity” in Augustine’s psychological model, Edwards’s doctrine of personhood afforded him the currency to speak of the triune God in decidedly human terms.³⁷

Like the Creator, divine image bearers possess self-consciousness with an inherent capacity for self-understanding and self-love. The internal dialectic between a person and his ideas, and the volitional response to those ideas, forms a micro-cosmic psychological trinity of sorts within the human person. Moreover, as an idealist, Edwards believed that the material world exists as an idea in the mind of God, and likewise this reality is communicated to human persons by ideas. Therefore, God’s social nature is inextricable from his reflexive personhood in the psychological Trinity, meanwhile providing humanity with its own foundation for personhood in an ideal world. According to Amy Plantinga Pauw, Edwards’s “emphasis on both personal agency and deep relationality within the Godhead allowed him to bring together the social and psychological models for the Trinity in an imaginative way and plumb them as a resource for ‘living unto God.’”³⁸ Therefore, for Edwards, human personhood exhibits the same kind of reflexive and relational qualities, often simultaneously. As William Danaher explains, human self-knowledge cannot be insulated from those around us:

Most importantly, for Edwards personhood is not an individualistic concept. That is to say, he does not define a person in isolation from all relations, for to be a person is to exist in a kind of community. Edwards conceives of a person in terms of self-consciousness, but self-consciousness itself is a kind of self-transcendence—one sees oneself from the perspective of another, and one’s happiness culminates in the union and communion that exists.³⁹

For Edwards, the distinction between the individual and the community was sometimes ambiguous, and this applied to both the human and divine persons. Hence, as in so many other branches of his thought, there is an abiding tension in Edwards’s doctrine of personhood. While admitting it grants a certain “personal” appeal, Stephen H. Daniel contends that a social view of the Trinity that includes self-conscious (rather than simply “conscious”) individuals is a “subject-based ontology” that wrongly appeals to human analogy. Employing postmodern concepts, Daniel also posits that even a self-conscious model that acknowledges “transcendence of their individuality in the unity of the Godhead” fails to justify divine per-

³⁶ Ross Hastings, “Jonathan Edwards and the Trinity: Its Place and Its Rich but Controversial Facets,” *JETS* 59 (2016): 585–600.

³⁷ According to Calvin, “There is no solidity in Augustine’s speculation, that the soul is a mirror of the Trinity, inasmuch as it comprehends within itself, intellect, will, and memory” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.15).

³⁸ Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 75.

³⁹ Danaher, *Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 32.

sonhood.⁴⁰ While Daniel is right to identify the tension that exists in a unified Godhead with three self-conscious divine Persons, his appropriation of Barthian individualism and his hard distinction between divine “consciousness” and “self-consciousness” seems, at times, to collapse into modalism.⁴¹ Moreover, Daniel neglects to apply the Edwardsean reciprocity of personal individualism and collectivism.

Grounded in a common idea of personhood, Edwards’s theology and anthropology were equally psychological and social. While Edwards was unwilling to completely conform God into a human image, he was nonetheless careful to acknowledge that human persons live both individually and collectively in a way that is analogous to the divine persons. Amy Plantinga Pauw recognizes this analogy when she suggests, “His extensive use of the psychological analogy for the Trinity shows that his deployment of *persons* language was neither exclusive nor literal.”⁴² In other words, for Edwards, God was much more than merely three persons; but he was indeed a God of three persons. In Edwards’s thought remains a minimally operating definition of a person in a general sense—a definition that included both God and humanity.

This equally relational and reflexive definition of personhood had far-reaching effects for Jonathan Edwards in the realm of ethics as well. To be a person is to be a moral being, but exactly *how* morality functions in the mind and heart of a human was a distinctively Edwardsean concept during the eighteenth century. According to Edwards and contrary to the secular moralists of his era, the natural human conscience was not a moral disposition. If this were so, the persons with the most active consciences would also have the most virtuous hearts. This is demonstrated, for example, in the eschatological judgment when unregenerate consciences will be “enlightened” so that they will see the full justice of their condemnation; however, these same sinners will not repent of their sins. Borrowing from the thought of English philosopher Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), Edwards concluded that all natural morality was intellectualist, capable of being ignored. However, Edwards also believed that the uneasiness of the natural conscience stems from the feeling of self-contradictory behavior. In *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, Norman Fiering concludes,

the conscience-stricken person can project himself in imagination into the aggrieved state of the wronged party and by this means can feel the anomaly of his immoral action. Without this psychological identification, which is in effect to

⁴⁰ Stephen H. Daniel, “Postmodern Concepts of God and Edwards’s Trinitarian Ontology,” in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion* (ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 54.

⁴¹ Karl Barth defined a person as “a knowing, willing, acting I.” *Church Dogmatics* II/I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 284. While Edwards would certainly affirm that a person does all of these things, his balancing of the psychological and social models of the Trinity strongly suggest that he would also incorporate a social element that Barth himself largely rejected, at least in the human sense.

⁴² Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All*, 79. Italics original.

reverse the moral situation *ceteris paribus* and put oneself in the place of the other and vice versa, there could be no internal sense of inconsistency.⁴³

The same mutual themes of individualism and collectivism are again at play in the reflexive personhood of Edwards, this time in the realm of human ethics. According to the Northampton theologian, moral behavior ultimately begins with an internal conversation and a kind of “self-transcendence,” to borrow Danahey’s language. Conversely, immoral behavior precipitates a kind of dysphoria whereby the person is seemingly at odds with herself.

The reflexive nature of human ethics is also on display in the golden rule, which commands, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Matt 7:12). Edwards understood the first clause in Christ’s command not as a hidden personal hedonism, but rather in terms of self-love grounded ultimately in the reflexive personhood of God. Not only does God’s self-understanding serve as the model for human self-understanding, but, according to Norman Fiering, “God’s self-love is thus a model of proper self-love. Men, too, as part of the creation, may properly love themselves provided that their love is *proportional* to that which is good in themselves.”⁴⁴ Edwards believed that self-love was not opposed to love of God, but “entered into” it. The discomfort and uneasiness that someone feels when acting inconsistently with the self-evident golden rule is for Edwards a basic principle of social ethics grounded in the reflexive nature of personhood. Again, the intellectual and volitional aspects of the psychological Trinity have significant implications for Edwardsean personhood.

According to Paul Helm, “The knowledge that God has of himself is a perfect exemplar of a Lockean idea of reflection.”⁴⁵ With the help of John Locke, Edwardsean self-consciousness can be more precisely described as personal self-reflection. Scholars today almost unanimously reject the idea that Jonathan Edwards was a “Lockean” in any significant sense.⁴⁶ However, most do affirm that John Locke aided Jonathan Edwards in his view of agency, ideas, and reflection. According to Locke, philosophers were in error when they treated the faculties as “some real beings in the soul, that performed . . . actions of understanding and volition.”⁴⁷ In other words, the will is not a self-activating entity that wills. Likewise, the understanding is not an independent agent who understands. In his *Freedom of the Will* (1754), Edwards advocated the same concept when he contended, “That which has the power of volition or choice is the man or the soul, and not the pow-

⁴³ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 154. Italics original.

⁴⁵ Helm, “The Human Self and the Divine Trinity,” in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, 97.

⁴⁶ In his biography of Edwards, George Marsden insists that John Locke “opened up exciting new ways of looking at things, especially regarding the relation between ideas and reality. Locke was crucial in setting Edwards’ philosophical agenda and shaping some of his categories. Yet Edwards was no Lockean in any strict sense.” *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 63.

⁴⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: printed for Tho. Basset, 1690), 117 (2.21.6).

er of volition itself.”⁴⁸ Faculties are not separate, self-determining entities. Rather, the moral agent is the person, *not* the individual faculty. Thanks to Lockean faculty psychology, Edwardsean personhood was noticeably unitary. As Conrad Cherry explains, “Locke is concerned to overcome that form of the faculty-psychology ... which annuls the integrity of the willing and knowing human agent by conceiving the mental powers as separate, self-activating entities. Edwards was fully persuaded by this Lockean argument.”⁴⁹

The question of human faculties was at the very center of the controversies growing out of the Great Awakening, and Lockean epistemology helped Edwards to comprehend the complexities and holistic nature of the human person in conversion. Rejecting the existence of innate ideas, Locke held to the notion that an idea is the object of the mind and that these ideas are derived in empirical “sensation” or “reflection.” Therefore, according to Locke, the raw materials for all human knowledge are derived from human experience. The fundamental building blocks of knowledge Locke called “simple ideas” (e.g., ideas of yellow, cold, bitter, thinking, willing, etc.). “Complex ideas,” on the other hand, are formed by the mind comparing or uniting these simple ideas through experience.

Unlike complex ideas, the reception or possession of a simple idea is so basic an experience that it cannot be articulated through language (e.g., describing the taste of a pineapple). Edwards adopted this epistemological analogy in his explanation of the Christian’s relish for the things of God, comparing it to the taste of honey. However, instead of empirical sensation, the simple idea becomes for Edwards the gift of faith by the Spirit, prompting the unified efforts of the will and the understanding. Like John Locke, Edwards never confused the concerted actions of the mind and will with the external idea. This is precisely where Edwards’s idealism and reflexive personhood inform his doctrine of conversion. According to Edwards, “Faith is the entire acquiescence of the soul in the *idea* of Christ as my Savior in a sense and conviction of his reality and goodness as a Savior as the Gospel reveals him.”⁵⁰ Illuminated by the Holy Spirit, the simple idea of Christ is a “light” in the mind that evokes a mental response, followed by a volitional response in love to Christ by the Spirit. This is the psychological Trinity at work in the conversion theology of Jonathan Edwards.

However, despite Edwards’s distinction of faculties, his psychology of conversion was indeed unitary. With the gift of faith through the Spirit, both the intellect and will are summoned, resulting in the “religious affections,” or “the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.”⁵¹ For Locke the secular empiricist, this initial idea is derived in physical experience. For Edwards the Reformed theologian, it springs from the Holy Spirit as the initial seed of

⁴⁸ *Works*, 1:12.

⁴⁹ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), 16.

⁵⁰ Cited in Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*, 18–19.

⁵¹ *Works*, 1:13.

faith. As Danaher observes, "Although implicit, the influence of the psychological analogy is evident in Edwards's depiction of the interdependent relation between the understanding and the affections."⁵²

Edwardsean themes of reflection, ideas, and agency, borrowed from Locke, confirm McClymond and McDermott's assertion that at "the center of all Edwards's thinking about affections and religious experience was his conviction of the unity of the human person."⁵³ For Edwards, reflexive personhood was soteriological in nature, explaining both the structure of the Godhead and how it shaped the very process of conversion in bringing sinners into relation with him. As the Son is the reflexive knowledge of the Father, and the Holy Spirit the delight between the Father and Son, so likewise the image of Christ in the gospel bestows the believer with a knowledge of the Father and love to him through the Holy Spirit. Edwards's doctrine of conversion was a thoroughly Trinitarian soteriology. Unlike Augustine who pictured the triune God more in terms of substance, Edwards greatly preferred to consider the unity of God in terms of mutual participation in an identical idea. In sum, reflexive personhood provides the basis for our knowledge of self and of God through the Gospel.

III. REDEMPTIVE PERSONHOOD

The third criterion for Edwardsean personhood is in some ways a synthesis of the previous two. In addition to the psychological and the sociological, the Northampton theologian also viewed personhood teleologically. In short, it was Edwards's belief that there was an overarching purpose to everything, including personhood. From the silkworm to the raven to the sun, everything had an end for which God created it.⁵⁴ Through his doctrine of the covenant of redemption, Edwards advocated the traditional Puritan view that the salvation of sinners and the consequent glory of Christ in salvation were designed before the beginning of the age via the divine counsel between the Father and Son.⁵⁵ This covenant included not only the atonement but also the Son's incarnation whereby the second Person of the triune God would take on flesh and become a human person. The doctrine

⁵² Danaher, *Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 123.

⁵³ Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 314.

⁵⁴ In his *Images of Divine Things* (1728), Edwards's typology of nature is on full display. For example, according to Edwards, "The silkworm is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing" ("Images of Divine Things," *WJE Online*, vol. 11: *Typological Writings* [ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance Jr., and David Watters; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008], 59).

⁵⁵ "Some things were done before the world was created, yea, from all eternity. The persons of the Trinity were as it were confederated in a design and a covenant of redemption, in which covenant the Father appointed the Son and the Son had undertaken their work, and all things to be accomplished in their work were stipulated and agreed" (*WJE Online*, vol. 9: *A History of the Work of Redemption* [ed. John F. Wilson; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008], 118).

of human personhood was not arbitrary; it had a redemptive telos. In *The Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and His Successors*, D. P. Rudisill explains,

Edwards's supralapsarian view of election may be stated briefly as follows: election is the predetermined and inviolate decree of the inscrutable will of the sovereign God respecting every soul He creates. Edwards does not distinguish between the foreknowledge and foreordination of God. God foreknows and foreordains all things. His omniscience and prescience are minutely perfect.⁵⁶

According to Jonathan Edwards, God predetermined everything in the cosmos for the "ultimate end" of glorifying himself by communicating himself and his glory to his creation, "so that in delighting in the expressions of his perfections, he manifests a delight in himself; and in making these expressions of his own perfections his end, he makes himself his end."⁵⁷ From before the beginning of the ages, God willed to communicate the knowledge and love of himself to human persons. Edwards believed that this was chiefly expressed at the cross: "It is evident, that the glory of God is the ultimate end of the work of redemption; which is the chief work of providence towards the moral world, as is abundantly manifest from Scripture. For the whole universe is put in subjection to Jesus Christ."⁵⁸ Therefore the gospel is, in many ways, the nexus of psychological, sociological, and redemptive personhood: humanity fulfills its ultimate end through a gospel that brings sinners into relation with God through the knowledge and love of God.

This, of course, raises questions regarding divine personhood. For instance, if personhood is simply teleological, does this then mean that it lacks ontology? In other words, are the "hypostases" of the triune God actually "persons" or only temporally so? For Edwards, the distinction between God's being and his "end" is a false dichotomy. In other words, there is no possible scenario wherein God is not glorious and is not communicating that glory to his creation.⁵⁹ Therefore, for Edwards, to speculate a hypothetical universe in which God possesses personhood without a telos for such would be nonsensical.

For Edwards, salvation is not simply the apex of revelation and divine glory; it is a personal event. In other words, redemption is *for* persons *by* persons. Therefore, the common personhood of God and man makes salvation fitting. For Edwards, persons are perceiving beings because direct perception is derived in consciousness. In the act of redemption, Edwards explains, "A spiritual, created being

⁵⁶ Dorus Paul Rudisill, *The Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and His Successors* (New York: Poseidon, 1971), 14.

⁵⁷ *Works*, 1:100.

⁵⁸ *Works*, 1:111.

⁵⁹ Edwards has been accused of applying limits and necessity to God in his treatment of God's "ultimate end." After citing the mountain of praise for Edwards's *The End of Creation* (1765), McClymond and McDermott pose the inevitable question, "On the other hand, did God have an option of not creating a world at all? If not, how could the creating of the world be a free action expressing God's grace and goodness?" (Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 210).

can't have an immediate view of another mind without some union of personality."⁶⁰ Personhood is essential to the Gospel itself. As discussed previously, at the core of Edwards's doctrine of love is the idea of union, however, there is no redemptive union without a union of persons. Through the incarnation of the Son, human persons can be united by the Holy Spirit to the person of Christ. It is a personal redemption. No other being in the material realm is capable of such an intimate and glorifying union. An incarnation, as Edwards defined it, "is not a union of contact or influence, but a personal union."⁶¹

However, this union is more than simply a spiritual one. Human persons are united to the incarnate Christ by his Spirit and his flesh. McClymond and McDermott identify this as part of Edwards's "nuptial or bridal theology. The church, as the bride of Christ, receives its stature wholly from its relationship with Jesus Christ—the bridegroom. It is derived rather than inherent standing."⁶² Human persons are the only created beings in the universe offered as the bride of Christ. This is something that Edwards held in high esteem: "This spouse of the Son of God, the bride ... is that which all the universe was made. Heaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse."⁶³ The teleology of personhood is the union of God and man in the incarnate Christ: two natures, one person.

An examination of human and divine personhood would be incomplete without a discussion of a third group of beings: angels. Jonathan Edwards had an especially high view of angels. In a discourse on nature, Edwards once wrote that the nearer we come to God, the closer we will come to the "arbitrary influence of the Most High on the creature, till at length, when we come to the highest rank [i.e., angels], we shall come [to] an intercourse that is, in many respects, quite above all rules which we call the laws of nature."⁶⁴ For Edwards, angels belonged to the highest order of creation. The difference between God's communication with angels and with men is that, in the case of angels, "who behold the face of the Father which is in heaven," no natural means of communication is needed, such as sense organs or verbal language. In some sense it is a meeting of completely synchronized minds. Although Edwards never ventured to discuss the exact nature of their knowledge, according to McClymond and McDermott, Edwards's "greatest interest lay in the mission and function of the angels within redemptive history, and at almost every point his references to angels occur alongside references to Christ. An-

⁶⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "The 'Miscellanies,' no. 777," in *WJE Online*, vol. 18, *The "Miscellanies,"* 501–832 (ed. Ava Chamberlain; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 427.

⁶¹ "Miscellanies," no. 487, *WJE Online*, 13:532. Edwards's personal theology was so thoroughly fixed around the idea of union that he even claimed, "Christ has so much of the Spirit, and hath it in so high and excellent a manner, as to render him the same person with him whose Spirit it is." See Seng-Kong Tan, "Trinitarian Action in the Incarnation," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, 132.

⁶² McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 281.

⁶³ "Miscellanies," no. 103, *WJE Online*, 13:271.

⁶⁴ See Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 101.

gelology, for Edwards, was a corollary of Christology.”⁶⁵ Therefore the nature of angels and their relation to Christ seems to beg the inevitable question: are angels “persons”? Despite passing the first two criteria, angels do not fulfill the third. The reason behind their lack of personhood lies in divine purpose.

In some ways, it appears enigmatic that Edwards would ascribe superior wisdom, strength, intelligence, and faculties to angels while refusing to assign them personhood. However, at no time does Edwards ever refer to angels as persons. Despite the fact that they are moral beings capable of falling from God’s grace, fallen angels were not offered the eternal gift of redemption like fallen human persons (Heb 2:16). Instead, their primary purpose was to serve as ministering spirits in the redemptive plan of God for fallen human persons (Heb 1:14). In other words, God does not personally unite himself to angels in the way that he does with lesser humans.

Edwards believed that in the eschaton, with all things placed underneath his feet, Christ would assume his position as supreme Head over the elect angels. Like humans, angels too are dependent upon Christ for their eternal life. Moreover, at times, Edwards even seemed to suggest that angels would be united to Christ in some way. However, due to the redemptive nature of personhood, Edwards placed a heavy premium on the incarnation of Christ and the marital union that takes place between divine and human persons. According to Edwards, “It seems to me very proper and suitable, that the human nature should be advanced far above the angelic nature by the incarnation of Christ ... men are a more ultimate end of the creation than the angels [and] the angels ... are created for this end, to minister to the creatures.”⁶⁶ The incarnation, as an exclusive union of persons, was for Edwards an incredibly gracious act by a sovereign, electing God. Edwards even went so far as to acknowledge that this might seem like “a very improper thing” for superior beings to be placed below “inferior” ones. However, for Edwards, this was essential to the glory of God in the gospel itself. Though angels perhaps possess relational and reflexive properties, they are not part of a larger personal redemptive plan like their human counterparts. A proper exposition of Edwards’s doctrine of angels falls outside the scope of this particular paper; however, angels do serve a role in accentuating the redemptive nature of personhood.⁶⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Today Jonathan Edwards continues to garner praise and criticism for his writings, no doubt because his theology extended into so many different disciplines of thought. He was, as Sydney Ahlstrom has suggested, “possibly the Church’s great-

⁶⁵ McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 274.

⁶⁶ “Miscellanies,” no. 103, *WJE Online*, 13:271.

⁶⁷ For a brief study, see McClymond and McDermott’s *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* and the *Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia* (ed. Harry S. Stout; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017; section on angels by John Lowe) provide in-depth looks into Edwards’s angelology.

est apostle to the Enlightenment.”⁶⁸ The current debate over Edwardsean Trinitarianism has only widened this discussion. Lying underneath Edwards’s doctrine of the Trinity, humanity, ethics, soteriology, idealism, and countless other areas of thought is his doctrine of personhood. It was the aim of this paper to unearth this theological root in order to better understand Edwards’s system of thought as a comprehensive whole and to better address recent critiques of this thinking, merited and unmerited. While Edwards was willing to speak extrabiblically about the Trinity in remarkably human terms, a proper understanding of his doctrine of personhood lends perspective into his language and thought in a way that perhaps exonerates him from the charge of idolatrously fashioning God into the image of humanity. In addition to his penchant for blending modes of theology and philosophy, Edwards was also able to sustain a level of tension in his thinking that his successors were largely incapable of repeating. This only adds to his legacy as a theologian and to our responsibility to read Edwards on his own terms.⁶⁹

As a whole, Edwards employed three minimal criteria for identifying a person in the most general sense. Edwardsean personhood was (1) relational, (2) reflexive, (3) and redemptive. Each played a significant role in the way in which Edwards approached theology, anthropology, and soteriology. With the recent renaissance in Edwardsean studies, may these three touchstones of Edwardsean personhood help to guide and unify the ongoing conversation.

⁶⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “Theology in America,” in *The Shaping of American Religion*, vol. 1: *Religion in American Life* (ed. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison; Princeton Studies in American Civilization 5; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 245.

⁶⁹ Edwards’s disciple Samuel Hopkins once wrote of his mentor, “He called no man Father.” *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1765), 41.