



# Trinitarian Foundations for African Christian Theology: A Comparative Reformed Approach to Contextualization and Public Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the Trinitarian theology of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, and Herman Bavinck, and how it supplies underlying theological material in the construction of an African Christian theology which is biblically informed and contextually engaged. The aim of this article is to show how a recovery of Reformed Trinitarian theology can provide a theological underpinning for African theology which is robustly orthodox and societally transformative. The article, therefore, sides with Isaac Boaheng's position by affirming that Trinitarian theology provides the needed balance in terms of a theological and methodological approach to contextualization, public theology, and ethics in Africa while subscribing to his "non-negotiable essentials" for doing African theology, namely biblical, glocal, oral-symbolic-written theologies, and societal relevance. The study employs a historical retrieval and reappropriation method by drawing insights from these theologians for purposes of conversation with African theological voices and communal philosophies. The conversation shows how Calvin's covenantal order, Edwards's theology of beauty and love, Barth's Christocentric justice and Bavinck's organic ontology are theological resources available to constructively address African concerns of justice, reconciliation, governance and public life. Among the recommendations are the need to develop African theology with a more highly integrated balance of doctrinal fidelity and contextual relevance; to retrieve both oral and symbolic forms of theological expression as well as written. This article adds to the scholarship by showing that classical Reformed Trinitarian theology, when reclaimed, can not only strengthen African Christianity but also furnishes global theology with contextual resources that are doxological, ethical and missional.

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## INTRODUCTION

Isaac Boaheng lists the key principles that should undergird any African Christian theology by emphasizing that it must be biblical, glocal/global, oral, symbolic, and written, and possess a relevance for African realities.<sup>1</sup> These demands are paradoxical, after all. The issue is to develop a theology which is in touch with the depths of African socio-cultural reality, rooted in fundamental truths of

<sup>1</sup> Isaac Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 7, no. 7 (December 23, 2021): 215–28, 223 -224. <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20217122>.

Christianity. The possibility lies that if the African theology could be developed appropriately, it is hoped that it might not only resuscitate African Christian life but also offer the global theology an input from a particular context other than what it presently has.

This conflict between imported Western theological methodologies and indigenous African religious sensitivities remains critical in configuring African Christianity. Missionary Christianity has in the past been dismissive of African worldviews and how spirituality is expressed, with a breakdown in the relationship between doctrine and reality. In response, African theologians have urged for a theology that is rooted in Africa's epistemic economy and speaks from Africa's epistemic space. However, contextual significance must not be bought at the cost of doctrinal consistency. Regarding this, Boaheng's insistence on embedding African Christian theology in biblical fidelity is immensely important, as it will aid in anchoring theological creativity in the world of divine revelation.

In this context, the doctrine of the Trinity, which is a doctrine that has traditionally been celebrated as the heart of the Christian faith, provides a fertile ground for a theological renaissance. As a theology of unity and diversity, of relationality and mission, the reality of the Trinity encapsulates African communal ethos, spiritual holism, and social ethics. The doctrine of the Trinity, especially as found in the classic Reformed presentations of Trinitarian theology, offers a metaphysical and moral grammar to speak to the spiritual and social aspects of human existence.

The retrieval and reappropriation of Trinitarian theology in Calvin, Edwards, Barth, and Bavinck, comparatively considered, provides a constructive way into the task. All these theologians bring their own insights: Calvin's rootedness in self-revelation and covenantal order; Edwards' sensitivity to divine beauty and relationship love; Barth's Christ-centeredness in justice and revelation; Bavinck's attention to the unity between unity and diversity in divine and human life. African theology has the opportunity to go beyond mere reaction and develop a theologically rich configuration that takes seriously theological doctrines while maintaining its contextuality in conversation with such thinkers. In addition, a Trinitarian recovery speaks to the communal and participatory reality of African religious experience. African focus on relationality, such as the Ubuntu thought, corresponds to the perichoretic inner life of the Triune God—Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit cohabiting in each other and in shared life. It gives a theological blueprint also for ecclesiology, spirituality, governance, reconciliation and social justice.

This article seeks to examine how the classical Reformed doctrine of the Trinity retrieved from Calvin, Edwards, Barth, and Bavinck can provide a theological anchor to build upon a biblically faithful, contextually engaged, and ethically reforming African Christian theology. It argues that African theology must be grounded in the Triune God who creates, redeems and renews all things in community, if it is to become all it can be.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a methodology of historical retrieval and theological reappropriation, which is based on Isaac Boaheng's paradigm for doing African Christian theology. Boaheng argues that African theology should be biblical, glocal (locally rooted and globally responsive), involved in oral, symbolic, and written theologies; and should have relevance for African realities.<sup>2</sup> These non-negotiable essentials serve as the evaluative prism through which this article examines classical Reformed Trinitarian theology through contemporary African application. This coincides with Parratt's methodological insistence that if African theology is to arise from the writhing and death throes of local African experience, it has at the same time to be in critical dialogue with the historical Christian understanding.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on this African paradigm, the study retrieved central Trinitarian motifs in the Reformed tradition through key figures— Calvin, Edwards, Barth and Bavinck. Theology is drawn from their writings, not simply in terms of content, but through the ways in which they conceive of divine communion, relatedness, and mission can be a resource for African theological formation and praxis. The next recourse was to a comparative theological study of these theologians, wherein their convergences in Trinitarian architecture, ethical stakes, and visions for ecclesial life can be emphasized.

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<sup>2</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 223 – 24.

<sup>3</sup> John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 15-18.

These were then critically interrogated with the voices in African theologies like Elias Bongmba, Tinyiko Maluleke and Esther Mombo, particularly on issues of justice, reconciliation, and ethical formation in the African context. Finally, the study retrieved these insights into a Trinitarian account of African theology that is doxological, ethical, and missional. It argued that the doctrine of the Trinity, rightly contextualized through Boaheng's framework, offers not only a metaphysical coherence but practical power for ecclesial renewal, public theology, and cultural engagement in Africa today.

### **ISAAC BOAHENG'S FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

Isaac Boaheng offers an organic and integrated framework for doing African Christian theology in the form of a theology of fourfold indigeneity, namely biblical, glocal, oral, symbolic and written theologies, and relevance to African theologies. These aspects, however simplistic they may appear, provide an effective method for theologizing that attends to the authority of Scripture as well as the depth of African cultural expressions.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Biblical**

At the center of Boaheng's proposal is the centrality of Scripture as the normative foundation for theology-making. For the African manifestation of Christian theology to be truly Christian, it will have to be grounded on Scripture, and at the same time make use of African symbols, traditions, and experiences. Boaheng argues that African theology should go back to the Bible, not for proof-texts, but for an interface with the biblical story and the biblical worldview.<sup>5</sup> This begins with reading Scripture in the context of African cosmologies and mundane experience, such as spiritual warfare, communitarian conceptions of sin and salvation, and of the sacred and profane. This concentration calls African theologians to articulate hermeneutical models that can dialogue with the original historical-grammatical reference of the Scripture and the African social imaginary. Like African cosmological insights into the holistic nature of reality in ways that bind the spiritual and the material, it requires theological expressions of Trinitarian praxis that acknowledge the Triune God not just in salvation history, but in healing, providence, community formation, and deliverance. Reformed Trinitarian theology offers a coherent interpretative lens on Scripture as a witness to God's redemptive will as it is expressed in God's inner-Triune life.

#### **Glocal**

Boaheng's word "glocal" communicates the demand that theology be globally orthodox and locally relevant.<sup>6</sup> Instead, African Christian theology should transcend parochialism and also resist the uncritical imposition of foreign Western theological schema. Glocal theology is a theology that remains faithful to historic Christianity and, at the same time, is understandable and relevant in an African context. This is particularly critical after neocolonial theological hegemony is being exerted by many theological schools and church traditions in Africa. A Trinitarian base empowers the glocal mission. The relational, inclusive, and missionary character of the Trinity upholds universality and particularity. Calvin's theology insists on the catholicity of the faith, Barth's on Christocentric universality, Bavinck's on common grace, Edwards' on an aesthetic of divine fullness, all working to provide a kind of theological speech that can transcend cultural walls by remaining culturally encased. So, African theology can then use this Trinitarian grammar to develop doctrinal articulation that prophetically addresses African nations while engaging global trends in theology.

#### **Oral, Symbolic and Written Theologies**

Boaheng challenges the hegemony of academic, literate theology, asserting the authenticity and aliveness of oral and symbolic forms of theological expression in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Since in most human communities of history (that is, non-literate communities), oral tradition, story, song, dance, and ritual

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<sup>4</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 221-28.

<sup>5</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 222.

<sup>6</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 223.

<sup>7</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 224 -25.

are the chief means of both information and memory, theologies must have expression in such accessible, embodied, communal forms. There is, in fact, a built-in plurality of expression in Trinitarian theology. The relationality of the Trinity, which is interpreted in terms of perichoresis, or mutual indwelling, can be described liturgically, poetically, and narratively. Indeed, the theology of beauty and the spiritual senses in Jonathan Edwards will help to develop a symbolic theology that is in dialogue with African sacred aesthetics. Barth's organicist conception of divine revelation in event corresponds with African communal worship, ritual drama and performing acts of faith. Accordingly, African Christian theology should not let the theologising be reserved to the academy, and the local communities should be enabled to be theologians on the basis of their community-practiced and expressed faith.

### **Relevance to African Realities**

The urgency of this demand about the relevance of African theology to the actual social, political and spiritual concerns of the African people is possibly "the most of all to ask".<sup>8</sup> Theology, he insists, cannot be something that is done in the abstract, but must be contextual and pastoral as well as addressing poverty, corruption, disease, injustice, or spiritual warfare. Theology has to do with hope and transformation. From this perspective, the doctrine of the Trinity is not just an academic abstraction, nor is it an esoteric metaphysical hypothesis, but rather it is precisely an operative tool for dealing with African realities. The Triunity of God exemplifies reconciled diversity, shared power, mutual service and missional engagement. Barth's divine freedom and justice, Calvin's Spirit in sanctification and discipline, Bavinck's public theology and Edward's spiritual ethics provide an African theology to engage society prophetically. An African theology that returns to this Trinitarian vision will not only be therapeutically orthodox but will also be pastorally relevant and socially redemptive.

In sum, Boaheng's model goes beyond being a methodological guideline to Africans; it serves as an invitation to produce an African Christian theology that is theologically grounded, epistemologically domesticated, and socially relevant. In reclaiming the Reformed doctrine of the Trinity, African theologians discover doctrinal clarity as well as a healthy theology that is in touch with the African context on the one hand and in touch with the church of Christ in the world on the other.

### **THE TRINITY AS METHOD AND MESSAGE IN REFORMED THEOLOGY**

The Trinitarian theologies of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, and Herman Bavinck provide four interconnected ways of articulating the claim that the life of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the ontological foundation of the world and the redemptive fountain of Christian mission. Writing from very different historical and theological contexts, each theologian gives us important clues as to how the doctrine of the Trinity functions as a theological affirmation and how it is to be accomplished also by means of adopting it not only as a pattern of ethical thinking and social discourse. Identifying and assessing each contribution and how their theologies may be positively tapped for the African continent) is the concern of this section.

#### **John Calvin: The Trinity and the Order of the Covenant**

Calvin sets Trinitarianism at the core of Christian theology as revealed by God about himself. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin emphasizes that knowledge of God commences with the self-revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, attested in Scripture and ratified by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit (*Calvin Inst.*, 1.13.2–17). For Calvin, the Trinity is not a speculative doctrine rather it is a practical one, supplying as it does the root of the entire economy of salvation, church discipline and Christian ethics. Calvin emphasizes the unique assignments of each person in the economy of salvation while maintaining the unity of divine substance. Salvation is attributed to the Father as planned, the Son as accomplished and the Spirit as applied. This practical Trinitarianism resonates profoundly with African ecclesial traditions, which stress divine agency, communal

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<sup>8</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 226 -27.

responsibility, and moral obligation. Moreover, Calvin's theology is covenantal; thus it summons communities to ordered relationships under God's rule. His conception of church government, social justice, and public morality makes his theology fertile grounds for a vision of African Christian social ethics which is grounded in Trinitarian ordering and divine justice.<sup>9</sup>

### **Jonathan Edwards: Trinitarian Beauty and Communal Ontology**

Jonathan Edwards offers one of the most spiritually penetrating Trinitarian theologies in the Reformed tradition. His Trinitarian model is a community of persons living in perfect love and unity. The Father is the principle of divinity, the Son is the Logos or self-expression of God, and the Holy Spirit is the love flowing from both. Edwards, in his *Discourse on the Trinity*, says, "The Holy Ghost is the act of God's infinite delight in Himself, or it is the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in infinite love and delight."<sup>10</sup> For Edwards' relation ontology, the persons of the Trinity coexist in perichoretic communion is strikingly similar to the African value system of relationality and communal identity. His concern with the divine beauty, the moral affections and participation in the life of God suggests a theological justification for the integration of aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality in African theology. This will also help to match oral and symbolic modes of theological language, such as liturgy, poetry, and indigenous music, which usually have a strong theological content in African contexts. And, to the extent that Edwards had a doctrine of "consent to being" and he focused as he did on love as the core of divine nature, one might have a deep potential for an alternative account of human dignity, social concord, and reconciliation in the African context. The Spirit, as the divine unity of love, enables African churches to live the reconciling mission in divided societies.

### **Karl Barth: Christocentric Revelation and Prophetic Encounter**

Karl Barth revolutionizes Trinitarian theology by suggesting that Christ is the clue to the being of God. In *Church Dogmatics I/1*, it is maintained by Barth that God's being is becoming God's Triune identity comes to expression in Jesus Christ. Barth's point is that God can only be known in His self-revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit in the economy of salvation;<sup>11</sup> he resists abstract metaphysical speculation. Barth's dynamic, relational, revealed Trinitarianism resonates with African mores emphasizing divine activity in history. His witness and disciple-based theology grounded in the self-giving of God in Christ, holds promise for Africa's yearning for a prophetic theology against political oppression, corruption and injustice. Barth's explication of God's freedom and grace provides a theological reproach to both authoritarianism and prosperity gospel, instead commending a theology of solidarity, service and liberation. Barth's Trinitarian ethics also anchor Christian identity in participation rather than following, God's mission. This has immediate relevance to African churches in their quest to retrieve their voice in society as the prophetic voice calling for justice and peace that is based on the vision of the Triune God who stands on the side of the oppressed.

### **Herman Bavinck: Trinitarian Ontology and the Harmony of Creation**

Herman Bavinck develops an organic doctrine of the Trinity that is shaped by both the catholic tradition and the Reformed confession. According to Bavinck, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an isolated doctrine but the central truth that informs everything else in Christian teaching, life, and practice. The Trinitarian shape of God, he argues, is not an idea, let alone a speculative one, but a living reality in whose light he claims to observe both creation and redemption and their consummation. In this aspect, Bavinck writes: "The doctrine of the Trinity is the core of the Christian religion; the confession of the Trinity sets the Christian religion apart from other religions" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:298). What makes Bavinck so extraordinary is the manner in which he manages to maintain unity and distinction between God and person and, thereby, relationality as foundational to being itself. He articulates, at the subsequent metaphysical level, the perichoretic unity of the three persons – Father, Son and Spirit as the metaphysical ground of all creaturely life. This divine harmony

<sup>9</sup> Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (CUP Archive, 1985), 138 -142.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13: Theological Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 131.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1940), 316.

and diversity-in-unity is reflected in the world, which serves as a powerful pattern for human community, social cooperation, and justice. In the African world, where communal life and relational ethics are at the center, Bavinck's theology coheres well with the ontological underpinning of Ubuntu and other forms of communal philosophizing.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Bavinck's theology of common grace has far-reaching implications for relating to African traditional religion and public culture. And He, in His providence, does provide the gift of moral insight, sociopolitical order, and artistic beauty beyond the covenant community as well.<sup>13</sup> This theological stance allows African theologians to recognize indigenous wisdom traditions as good and worthy in themselves, while also as fulfilled and critiqued in the gospel of the Triune God.<sup>14</sup>

Bavinck also emphasizes the epistemological reach of theology indicating that it must go to science, politics, education, aesthetics, and ethics. His highly Trinitarian vision of the world opens the clearing for African theologians to contribute to the shaping of every dimension of the public world, knowing that God's truth is not just 'out there' but saturating all the realities. Crucially, his concern for both organic development and theological catholicity renews the call for the Patristic and scholastic wisdom on the Trinity to be recovered within a Reformed context, and this provides African theologians with a possibility of a model of fidelity and flexibility.<sup>15</sup>

Bavinck's theology offers African Christian theology a deep picture of the Triune God as the basis for order, beauty, and redemption. His focus on relational ontology, common grace and theological integration summons the African church to develop a theology that would be as culturally bound as biblically-based, as public-minded as ecclesial, and as doxological as ethical.<sup>16</sup>

## TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY AND BOAHENG'S ESSENTIALS

Given Boaheng's non-negotiable essentials for African Christian theology, the Trinitarian theologies of Calvin, Edwards, Barth and Bavinck suggest not only dogmatic profundity and doxological fullness, but they also articulate a dynamic theological rubric which sounds the resonating board of Africa's historical, cultural and ecclesial context. All four of Boaheng's four pillars— biblical, glocal, oral-symbolic-written theologies, and contextual relevance can be further developed and anchored in a Trinitarian reflection.

### Biblical

All four theologians locate their Trinitarian articulations in the testimony of the Scriptures. Calvin develops his theology of the Triune God by close reading of the OT and the NT, especially the texts that elucidate the economic functions of Father, Son and Spirit (*Calvin Inst.*, 1.13). Edwards' Trinitarian theology develops from his meditation on the biblical portrait of God as boundless love and light, with a primary focus on Johannine literature, including John 17 and 1 John 4.<sup>17</sup> For Barth in the *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and II/1, God's self-revelation is based on the person of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the proclaimed and written Word.<sup>18</sup> Bavinck's entire theological vision is built around the concept that the Bible is the self-disclosure of the Triune God and that it should be read organically as a diversity-in-unity.<sup>19</sup>

Boaheng indicates that African Christian theology should be biblically true and culturally relevant.<sup>20</sup> This sits well within the interpretive commitments of these theologians and particularly their assertion that biblical theology must be textually rooted, pastorally helpful theology. Edwards

<sup>12</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 303 - 305.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 437-439.

<sup>14</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 225-227.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 112-115, 298 - 300.

<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 102-107, 428 - 430.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13: Theological Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 131-133.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, 296-316.

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 297-300.

<sup>20</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 222.

and Bavinck, for example, present that one must not only read Scripture for doctrinal accuracy, but also for the spiritual transformation of communities.

### **Glocal**

Boaheng's idea of "glocal" articulates the double need for global orthodoxy and attention to local contexts.<sup>21</sup> Lamin Sanneh argues that the translatability of Christianity is not a weakness but its greatest strength. Christianity, unlike Islam or Buddhism, has no "sacred language."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the vernacular becomes a site of divine encounter. African languages and idioms are not obstacles to orthodoxy but channels of theological innovation and local embodiment. This makes a strong case for glocal theology that is both confessional and contextual. The Reformed Theologians analyzed here take up both of these commitments. Calvin's theology took form within 16th century Geneva but took on universal resonance through his commentaries and confessions. Edwards was writing in colonial New England, but he articulated a theology of divine beauty and affections that is timeless and culture transcendent.<sup>23</sup> Barth's own theology was forged in the crucible of Nazi Germany, but he would steadily insist that theology must speak freshly in each cultural situation.<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, most forthrightly, brings catholic orthodoxy and Dutch Neo-Calvinist worries together, and insists that theology must be able to respond to the specific varieties of cultural, political, or philosophical challenges that any given age poses.<sup>25</sup>

From this Trinitarian foundational ground, African Theology can develop its doctrines in a manner consistent with the ecumenical creeds and with the Reformed confessions and yet dialogue with the inheritances of African Communal values, the Traditional knowledge system and the current challenges. The doctrine of the Trinity, received everywhere but relevantly here, is likewise a glocal model of exactly what Boaheng recommends.

### **Oral, Symbolic and Written Theologies**

Boaheng argues that African theology must not be confined to academic language, but peripheral expressions which are oral and symbolic so as to be available to non-literate and the rural church.<sup>26</sup> Trinitarian theology, as Edward and Barth uniquely presented it, particularly invites these modes of expression. Edwards's language of divine beauty, spiritual sense, and religious affections gets translated into African liturgical forms—songs (*Abibinnwom*), dances, and visual art which present the glory and oneness of God. Barth's drama, encounter, and Word-event theology of revelation provides powerful analogies for African story-telling and ritual worship. Additionally, Bavinck's attention to theological aesthetics and an organic relation between doctrine and life opens the way for symbolic theology, one which also gives Holy and corporate symbols their place. Calvin's worship, based on the Psalter and his focus on God's majesty and providence, also resonates with African traditions of sung theology and worship in creation.

### **Relevance to African Realities**

Furthermore, Boaheng argues that theology must address the most urgent needs of Africa, such as poverty, corruption, tribal disputes, spiritual warfare and social disintegration.<sup>27</sup> According to Kwame Bediako, African Christianity must come to birth in terms of its own cultural and intellectual heritage rather than being a Western implant. He argues that the incarnation legitimates culture as a vehicle of divine truth and that African thought forms, if critically appropriated, can make rich theological contributions. He emphasizes that Christ comes into African reality not as an alien but as the fulfilment

<sup>21</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 223.

<sup>22</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 55-58.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Beauty of the World: A Theology of Aesthetics*, ed. John Piper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 109–113; Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13: Theological Writings*, 113–138.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 296–316; Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, 274–287.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 112-113.

<sup>26</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 224–225.

<sup>27</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials," 226-227.

of its fundamental desires and social logic.<sup>28</sup> Trinitarian theology retrieved from the Reformed faith is a thorough response. A vision of social justice and moral accountability is grounded in Calvin's theology of divine sovereignty and providence.<sup>29</sup> Edwards's theology of relationship provides an ontology of love and peace in the midst of fractured communities crying out for healing. That is, Barth's Christocentric theology supports prophetic criticism of political and religious oppression, but Bavinck's public theology and doctrine of common grace leave theological room to reflect upon the need for reformation in political systems, economic practices, and education.<sup>30</sup>

Every one of these theologians states that Christian doctrine is to be lived, not just believed. Their shared, Trinitarian vision holds ethics within God's own being and challenges the church to mirror that divine communion in its worship, mission, and justice. This vision provides African Christian doctrine not just with doctrinal legitimacy, but also with spiritual vigor and prophetic voice. Again, Trinitarian theology, as expounded by these Reformed voices, respects and enhances Boaheng's proposal for African Christian theology. It is the institution's integration across the social fabric of life that offers renewal to biblical interpretation and global-local integration, which fosters symbolic and oral forms of expression. It provides transformative resources that can challenge the lived experiences of the African reality.

### TOWARDS A TRINITARIAN MODEL FOR AFRICAN THEOLOGY

A viable Trinitarian model for African theology would be one that is based on the mystery of divine communion and relationality, which the doctrine of the Trinity tries to articulate. The recovery of Trinitarian theology from Calvin, Edwards, Barth and Bavinck is not just an academic exercise; it is a theological necessity that can redress and regenerate African theology from the inside. Their combined insights give an ontological and ethical grammar for re-thinking the contribution of theology towards the cultural, ecclesial, and socio-political life of Africa.

At the heart of this understanding is the recognition of God as Triune— one being in three persons, eternally united in love and perichoresis. This divine perichoresis serves as a diasporic analogue for African social belonging. The Trinitarian intertwining of life-beyond-self is not far removed from ubuntu and other African relational ontologies. The unity-in-diversity of the Trinity serves as a model for thinking about human associations, ecclesial organizations, and political systems that embody values of respect, justice, and harmony.<sup>31</sup>

Calvin's affirmation of the sovereignty of the self-revelation of the Triune God is instructive on the requirement that grounding African theology must rest on God's word and not on human thinking (*Calvin Inst.*, 1.13.1–3). For Calvin, knowledge of God does not arise from natural theology but is granted by God's free and gracious act of self-disclosure in Scripture and the incarnate Word. This conviction preserves theology from cultural imprisonment and roots it in divine authority and humility. His conception of covenant is further strengthened as it serves as the relational structure wherein God binds himself to mankind, summoning the Church to a life of obedience and community.

This order of covenant is not only vertical, of course, but profoundly social, informing Calvin's attention to justice, governance, and moral formation in the city. It offers African theology a Scriptural and theological foundation for critiquing exploitative power and transforming church practices that marginalize poor and vulnerable people. Höpfl assert that Calvin saw the church as a moral and political force in society, responsible for mirroring divine justice and organizing civil life according to the laws of God.<sup>32</sup> Vuyani Vellem, who shares this reformed vision, repeats and further explicates it by reflecting on a spirituality of liberation as drawn from the relational and liberating nature of the Triune God.<sup>33</sup> He argues that "this theology must be a theology of life, anchored in the reality of a God

<sup>28</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 226 - 229.

<sup>29</sup> Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 145 - 147.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 106-107.

<sup>31</sup> A.O., *Ogbonnaya. African Perspectives on the Trinity: Challenges and Promise of Trinitarian Theology in Africa*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 274.

<sup>32</sup> Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*.

<sup>33</sup> Vuyani Vellem, "The Church as the Site of Liberation." *Missionalia* 44, no. 2 (2016): 220–234.

who intervenes in history to save, to reconcile, and to renew.” In doing so, Calvin’s covenantal theology and Vellem’s liberationist quest intersect to provide a trajectory of African ecclesiology and ethics founded on divine justice, communal solidarity and covenantal responsiveness.

Edwards’s conception of divine beauty and love set in a framework of Trinitarian communion grounds a joyous, compassionate, and harmonious spirituality that resonates with the emotive and affective center of African religious experience.<sup>34</sup> Centrally, Edwards’s Trinitarian theology is formed by the idea of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, which spills over into creation and redemption. Not only does Barth’s theology assert that God is love, in the sense that this is the essence of God, but it also embodies love as true religion’s central dynamic. This perspective is in happy coincidence with African religious sensibilities, which value relationship, beauty and the corporate aspects of spiritual life.

Edwards’s focus on the aesthetic dimension of theology—the beauty of God as disclosed in the One who is both Christ and the Spirit resonates with African music, dance and storytelling in which beauty and harmony function your theology.<sup>35</sup> His theology offers a robust tool in the articulation of an enlivening connection between spiritual transformation and heart and mind, suggesting a full-bodied discipleship that involves suffering and joy, and the responsibilities we carry as a community. John Mbiti’s philosophical anthropology is based on the conviction that African personhood is relational, captured in the phrase, “I am because we are.” This ontology of community stands as a counter to Western individualism and rather adheres to the Christian concept of perichoresis (interpenetration) of the divine persons. Mbiti has made possible theological reflection that understands African cosmology as providing fertile soil for expressing Trinitarian realities.<sup>36</sup>

Barth’s affirmation of the actuality of God’s being in act—in the person and the work of Jesus Christ indicates the necessity of a theology that is both Christocentric and prophetic. Barth’s Triune God, in other words, is not a speculative concept but a living presence revealed in the historical occurrence of Jesus Christ, in whose life, death, and resurrection God’s being-in-action for the world becomes manifest.<sup>37</sup> This theology needs an ecclesiology and ethic that testify to the lordship of Christ over the powers, that resists idolatry, injustice and commodification of religion.

In an African context, where structural violence, economic disparities, and spiritual stooging erode the integrity of Christian witness, Barth’s vision challenges the church to become a community that is prepared to denounce injustice. His prophetic Christocentrism, which posits theology as a task of the church’s obedience to the living Word, resonates powerfully with African theological articulations of resistance and hope. David Bosch expands the idea of *missio Dei*, suggesting that mission is not in the strategy of men but in the inner life of the Triune God.<sup>38</sup> The church has a role in this divine sending. This reconfigures ecclesiology, meaning the church becomes not just a local establishment, but the primary site of God’s reconciling action in the world. Prophetic and Public Mission has a Trinitarian basis and therefore theology should be prophetic, public and participatory.

Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity as the locus of the harmony between being, knowledge, and life gives African theology the perspective to engage matters of public life with a more rounded and unfragmented worldview, grounded in a world in which creation is good, and grace is re-formative.<sup>39</sup> For Bavinck, the unity of the divine substance and the plurality of the three persons together form a coherence mediated between metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical dimensions of reality. This integral perspective opposes dualistic and fragmented theologies, which split doctrine from life and faith from culture. His theology of the organic unity rooted in the Abrahamic experience of revelation, creation and redemption gifts African theology with an explanatory framework that counters the Western monster of individualism and celebrates the communitarian values of almost all African societies. Living in a world that is ecologically degraded, socially fragmented, and culturally uprooted,

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *The Beauty of the World: A Theology of Aesthetics*, 109–113; Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13: Theological Writings*, 113–138.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan. Edwards, *The Beauty of the World: A Theology of Aesthetics*. , ed. John Piper. Wheaton (IL: Crossway, 2003), 97–103.

<sup>36</sup> J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 108-110.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, 296–316; Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, 274–287.

<sup>38</sup> David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390–93.

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 298–305.

Bavinck's theology highlights the goodness of creation and the importance of grace for the restoration of all things.<sup>40</sup>

Boaheng's recent reflections coincide with Bavinck's vision wherein theology would be infused with biblical orthodoxy and African communal expression and public mores.<sup>41</sup> Boaheng contends that African theology should be rooted in the Bible and, at the same time, should deal with the urgent social and ethical issues faced by African societies today, such as poverty, corruption, and social injustice. So does Neele, who foregrounds Bavinck's insistence that theology be historically revealed-rooted on the one hand and humanly contemporary relevant on the other; such a perspective is readily applicable to postcolonial theology.<sup>42</sup> In addition, thinkers, including Agang, argue for a public theology that strikes a balance between doctrine and social change.<sup>43</sup> Agang advocates a theology that is attentive to human dignity, community and good governance with contours that are echoed in Bavinck's call for the moral implications of Trinitarian belief within political and civil congregational and denominational life. In conjunction with these, Bavinck's theological synthesis and the contributions to it by these African voices provide a rich model for a public theology that is doctrinally strong and practically directed.

This Trinitarian paradigm argues that theology is doxological, ethical, and missional. It must create forms of community capable of mirroring God's own communion in worship, in life, and in sustained public witness. In a continent where division, grinding genitive squalor, identity dysphoria and crisis persist, the reality of Trinity offers a compelling, alternative vision of a socially regenerated humanity based on divine fellowship. The missional thrust of Trinitarian life invites the church to be a force for transformation, enacting hospitality, reconciliation, and justice.<sup>44</sup> Mercy Oduyoye appeals for a listening theology, a theology attentive to the reality of African women, specifically how they are oppressed, excluded, and marginalized in church and society.<sup>45</sup> She argues that theological language should instead be relational, inclusive, and justice-oriented, as the relationally focused, egalitarian Trinity reveals. Relationality, for her, is not mere metaphysics but rather it must mean something for ecclesial structures and ethical practices. This ecclesial witness should be liturgical and practical, coping with society through a spirituality that comes from the self-giving love of God and from God's relational ontology. In addition, Esther Mombo and Emmanuel Katongole, point out that a theology grounded in the Trinitarian relation can empower the African church to imagine its public identity anew.<sup>46</sup> Mombo calls for a theological education that fuses gender justice and solidarity with the larger community, shaped by a Trinitarian vision; meanwhile, Katongole's work on reconciliation theology presses the church to enact new social imaginaries nourished by the love of God. Their writing serves to further assert that Trinitarian theology cannot be a speculative doctrine but must shape the church's lived response to brokenness and systemic injustice.

Accordingly, a Trinitarian template for African theology is not a matter of theoretical systematics but a concrete structure of relationality and mission. It is rooted in the treasures of Reformed theology but open to the Spirit's leading throughout African cultures and histories. This vision requires that the task of African theology is more than simply contextual, thus it is participatory in the redemptive work of God to create communities that image the divine perichoresis in a life of mutuality, service and prophetic action. In the process, it offers an engaging theological perspective that is biblically based, contextually rooted, and prophetically oriented.

## CONCLUSION

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 429–431.

<sup>41</sup> Boaheng, "Doing African Christian Theology: Some Non-Negotiable Essentials."

<sup>42</sup> Adriaan C. Neele, *Before Jonathan Edwards: Sources of New England Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Sunday Bobai Agang, *No More Cheeks to Turn? Biblical Theology, Justice, and Violence in Postcolonial Africa*. (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Lewis Ayres, *The Shape of Trinitarian Theology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 231; Agbonkhanmeghe E Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Orbis Books, 2008), 52.

<sup>45</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, vol. 6 (A&C Black, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> Esther Mombo, "Gender, Power, and Theology in Africa," in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Bongmba (London: Routledge, 2021), 99–112; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

This article has shown that reclaiming and re-contextualizing Reformed Trinitarian theology vis-à-vis the contextual criterion by Isaac Boaheng provides African Christian theology with a solid and comprehensive basis. In dialogue with Calvin, Edwards, Barth, and Bavinck as well as African theologians such as Bongmba, Maluleke, and Mombo, the inquiry offered a theology that is biblically sound and doctrinally substantive even as it is responsive, socially, ethically, and communally, to the continent of Africa. Properly articulated, the doctrine of the trinity articulates divine relationality and mission and thereby provides a theological vision appropriate to ecclesial renewal, public responsibility, and cultural flourishing. African theology in embracing perichoresis as a vision of life can reflect the divine communion in forming churches and societies toward justice, reconciliation and holistic transformation.

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