

Essence and fullness: Evaluating the creator–creature distinction in Jonathan Edwards

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Abstract

Soteriological participation in God, variously termed theosis, divinisation or deification commands widespread interest across the spectrum of Christian theology. A key difficulty is how to maintain the creator–creature distinction, while bridging it to gain intimacy. Jonathan Edwards provides a Reformed perspective on this conversation, by way of his distinction between the incommunicable divine *essence* and the communicable divine *fullness*. This article clarifies this distinction by evaluating its coherence and exploring whether it divorces God's immanent and economic life. It argues that distinguishing two forms of participation – *methexis* versus *koinonia* – clarifies coherence and shows that it does not divide God's being from act.

Keywords: Jonathan Edwards, divine essence, *koinonia*, *methexis*, participation, theosis

Introduction

There is widespread interest, across the spectrum of the Christian tradition, in the concept of soteriological participation in God.¹ It is variously named – theosis, deification, divinisation, divine participation – but in each case it represents a comprehensive vision for the Christian life that centres on the saint's participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), through the economic activity of the Son and the Spirit. Crucially, classical Christian versions of soteriological participation achieve this in a way that maintains the creator–creature distinction, so that the human nature is not abrogated, but brought to its ultimate goal.

And it is this last piece that brings up much of the difficulty. Any theory of soteriological participation must do two things: it must maintain an

¹ For an overview of this interest, see Paul Gavrilyuk, 'The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum', *Modern Theology* 25/4 (2009), pp. 647–59; Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

ontological chasm between God and creature, and also bridge this chasm in close, intimate union. This article explores how one thinker, Jonathan Edwards, pursued these aims from within the Reformed tradition. Edwards is often cited as an exponent of soteriological participation, and he nested this vision within his overall doctrine of special grace.²

In this doctrine of special grace, Edwards distinguished the divine essence, which is not communicated in grace, from the divine fullness, which is communicated in grace.³ In the *Religious Affections*, the most influential of Edwards' works on grace, he describes grace in terms of soteriological participation, and qualifies himself by saying: 'Not that the saints are made partakers of the *essence* of God ... but, to use the Scripture phrase, they are made partakers of God's *fullness* (Ephesians 3:17–19, John 1:16) ... according to the measure and capacity of a creature ...'⁴

This distinction between essence and fullness risks a tension with Edwards' own Reformed tradition.⁵ It sounds similar to the Eastern Orthodox Palamite

² Many Edwards scholars claim a doctrine of theosis in Edwards. I broadly agree, but prefer to use Edwards' own category of special grace because it grounds him more firmly in his own Western tradition. For Edwards-theosis scholarship, see Kyle Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Polemics of Theosis', *Harvard Theological Review* 105/3 (2012), p. 260; and Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of Theosis', *Harvard Theological Review* 109/3 (2016), pp. 371–99. See also Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, 'The Theme of Divinization', in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 172–3.

³ 'It is not a communication of God's essence, but it is a communication of that which the Scripture calls God's fullness ...' Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon 498. 1 John 4:12', in *Jonathan Edwards Collection: General Collection* (New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 1738). L.4r.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 203 (emphasis added). When citing the Yale edition of Edwards' *Works*, I will give the full citation, and then abbreviate to 'WJE' with volume and page numbers.

⁵ Michael McClymond observes similarities between Jonathan Edwards and Gregory Palamas. Michael J. McClymond, 'Salvation as Divinization: Jonathan Edwards, Gregory Palamas and the Theological Uses of Platonism', in Oliver D. Crisp and Paul Helm (eds), *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), p. 145. Kyle Strobel also, while noting important differences, argues that Edwards' essence–nature distinction functions similarly to Vladimir Lossky's account of the essence–energies distinction. See Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Polemics of Theosis', p. 278; and Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology: A Reinterpretation*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2013), p. 203. Strobel is particularly helpful in pointing out that God's understanding and will (which map to the Son and Spirit respectively) are 'communicable natures' given in grace. While Strobel is right that Edwards speaks in the essence–nature categories, I believe that when he is focused on the Creator–creature distinction, his preferred distinction is essence–fullness. See

distinction between essence and energies, and contemporary Reformed thinkers have critiqued the Eastern version.⁶ Bruce McCormack and Myk Habets have argued that the essence–energies distinction drives a wedge between the immanent and economic Trinity, such that, ironically, the distinction serves to make God too distant, unreachable, and according to McCormack, at risk of seeming ‘unreal’.⁷ McCormack elsewhere argues that the concept of God’s ‘energies’ can only make sense if it refers to some sort of created grace.⁸ Habets argues that the essence–energies distinction divides God’s being from God’s act, and therefore serves to demote the Son and the Spirit into ‘intermediaries of God, not God himself’.⁹ McCormack and Habets differ in terms of their solutions to these problems. McCormack leaves behind the category of deification entirely, while Habets strongly supports it.¹⁰ Both McCormack and Habets aim their critiques at the Eastern Orthodox distinction of essence and energies, or to Western appropriations of this distinction.

These critiques are not aimed at Edwards or his distinction between essence and fullness, but they do press the question: what does Edwards mean by his distinction? Their critiques are all the more relevant given that they are both writing from a Reformed perspective. If Reformed theology resists the essence–energies distinction of the East, should it also resist Edwards’

WJE 2: 202–3, where Edwards uses *nature* language until he juxtaposes grace to the divine essence. When this occurs, he describes the communicable gift with the term *fullness*. However, Strobel’s and my accounts are complementary. Strobel’s ‘communicable natures’ is a helpful way of describing the inner functionality of what I am calling the divine fullness. In this article I am focused on the Creator–creature distinction, and so focus narrowly on the category of ‘fullness’.

⁶ McClymond, ‘Salvation as Divinization’; Strobel, ‘Jonathan Edwards and the Polemics of Theosis’, pp. 277–8.

⁷ Myk Habets, “‘Reformed Theosis?’ A Response to Gannon Murphy’, *Theology Today* 65/4 (2009), pp. 493–4. Bruce L. McCormack, ‘Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No: Two Modern Protestant Responses to an Ancient Question’, in Johannes Fischer, Hans-Peter Großhans and Ingolf U. Dalferth (eds.), *Denkwürdiges Geheimnis: Beiträge zur Gotteslehre: Festschrift für Eberhard Jüngel zum 70. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 373–4.

⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, ‘Union with Christ in Calvin’s Theology: Grounds for a Divinization Theory?’, in David W. Hall (ed.), *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of his Quincentenary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2010), pp. 505–6.

⁹ Habets, ‘Reformed Theosis?’, p. 494.

¹⁰ Cf. McCormack, ‘Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No:’, pp. 373–4; and Habets, ‘Reformed Theosis?’ Cf. Gannon Murphy, ‘Reformed Theosis?’, *Theology Today*, 65/2 (2008), pp. 489–90.

essence–fullness distinction?¹¹ I will leverage McCormack and Habets to interrogate Edwards’ distinction in the following two key questions:

1. Is there a coherent difference between the divine essence and the divine fullness in Edwards’ thought? If so, what is it?¹²
2. Does this distinction drive a wedge between God’s immanent and economic life, or between God’s being and act?¹³

I will argue that there is a coherent distinction between divine essence and divine fullness, and one that does not drive a wedge between the immanent and economic trinities. I will show this by tracing the concepts of the divine essence and the divine fullness through Edwards’ doctrines of the Trinity, christology and special grace.¹⁴ In each case we will show how Edwards utilises two complementary approaches to participation. He employs a version of *methexis* to establish essence and quiddity, and he employs a version of *koinonia* to establish intimacy between distinct persons.¹⁵ The divine essence is grounded on the first type of participation – *methexis* – whereas the divine fullness is grounded on the second type of participation – *koinonia*. I will show this particularly in the procession of the Son *ad intra*, and the Son’s bond of love with the Father, and then I will show a similar pattern in both the incarnation and the gift of special grace to the saint.¹⁶

¹¹ Although some Reformed theologians embrace the essence–energies distinction; see, for instance, Murphy, ‘Reformed Theosis?’.

¹² McCormack believes the theosis conversation often lacks sufficient clarity, especially when theologians posit a participation in uncreated energies and not in uncreated essence. He sees the distinction as incoherent, at least so long as both are regarded as uncreated. See McCormack, ‘Union with Christ in Calvin’s Theology’, pp. 505–6.

¹³ As Habets argues occurs in Palamite essence–energies distinction. See Habets, ‘“Reformed Theosis?”’, pp. 493–4.

¹⁴ W. Ross Hastings has identified these three ‘unions’ as central to Edwards’s vision in his book, *Jonathan Edwards and the Life of God: Toward an Evangelical Theology of Participation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁵ I take *methexis* to be participation orientated around some sort of shared being, whereas *koinonia* is a participation orientated around some sort of shared relationship. See Hastings, *Jonathan Edwards and the Life of God*, pp. 39–40, 56–8, 102, 441–2, 444. See also T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), pp. 184–6.

¹⁶ When speaking of created realities, Edwards often distinguishes between properties that are fundamental to a thing’s ontology versus characteristics ‘that do neither belong to their nature and essence, nor the result of those things that are: and these things are called supernatural or divine’. Edwards, ‘Sermon 498’, L. 6V. I have argued elsewhere that created ontology is grounded in *methexis* in God for being, whereas divine grace is grounded in a *koinonia* in divine fullness. This is how Edwards distinguishes created nature from divine grace, and is the background for such distinctions as common/special grace: Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang

With these observations in place, I will return to the questions above before concluding.

Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity

Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity is a key fountainhead for his entire theological vision.¹⁷ I will provide the briefest summary of his trinitarianism, before focusing in on the Son's *ad intra* procession. This is because the Son's *ad intra* procession bears the seed for clarifying the distinction between divine essence and fullness in grace.

Edwards believed in a God that is good and happy. Far from a trite platitude, Edwards believed this truth implied the necessity of multiple persons in God. Goodness and happiness include, for Edwards, the inclination to communicate happiness to another. God expresses this inclination, *ad intra*, through God's own reflections on himself. God thinks of himself, and this perfect idea, begets a perfect image of himself in the person of the divine Son. This may sound a leap, but one must keep in mind Edwards' idealism.¹⁸ For Edwards, things exist because God thinks them. If God thinks upon himself, then the mental image will not only be real, but it will be precise repetition of his own essence, and therefore a second divine person.¹⁹ But there is

Hyun Lee, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 153–97, nature/moral *imago dei* (WJE 2: 256); and natural/supernatural principles: Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 381. See also James Salladin, 'Nature and Grace: Two Participations in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18/3 (2016), pp. 290–303. My present argument distinguishing the divine essence from the divine fullness follows a similar pattern, but with particular reference to the uncreated divine nature and its relation to communicable grace.

¹⁷ This is no longer a controversial statement, although there is great debate regarding how to analyse his doctrine. For key studies, see Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002); Steven Studebaker and Robert W. Caldwell, *The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Text, Context, and Application* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation*, pp. 117–37; and Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards among the Theologians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 36–59; and the account that highlights Edwards' most unique contribution is Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*.

¹⁸ For a recent study of Edwards' idealism, and the theological problems and resources it offers, especially within christology, see Oliver D. Crisp, 'Jonathan Edwards, Idealism, and Christology', in Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton (eds), *Idealism and Christian Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 145–75.

¹⁹ It is instructive to note that when the Father reflects on the divine essence, his mental image is a person, not a set of abstract attributes. This would appear to confirm Strobel's more personal account of the divine essence. 'It is more immediately relevant to talk of God as 'whom' rather than 'what'. Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*, p. 46.

more. As God the Father considers himself in the Son, the two are united in a bond of divine love. This love proceeds from the Father and is returned by the Son. This mutual love is the Holy Spirit, and this explains how God can be truly happy. Thus, the Father is the source of the Godhead, the Son is the image of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the two.²⁰

We must now focus in upon the divine Son, and in particular: (1) the Father's ideation as the basis of the Son's share in divine essence, and (2) the bond of love between the Father and the Son.

Essence and fullness *ad intra*: The Son's union with the Father

How does the Son come to partake in the divine essence? The answer to this question will show that the Son's participation in the divine essence is a species of *methexis* – a type of participation where the thing shared is being itself. Recall the discussion above regarding the Father's act of begetting the Son. The Father reflects upon himself. This is a non-volitional movement that is fundamental to his personhood and essence.²¹ As the Father thinks upon himself, God's self-understanding generates. This self-understanding is perfect and infinite, such that it must issue forth in a co-essential, consubstantial subsistence, that is nevertheless relationally distinct from the Father. The Son is therefore a partaker of the divine essence.²² It is important to note that the Son's participation in essence is sufficiently established by the ideation of the Father. Edwards's Reformed tradition usually asserted that the Father communicated the divine essence in the Son's generation. This essential communication is perfect, so that the Son may be called *autotheos* with the Father.²³ Edwards affirms this idea when he speaks of the Son partaking of the divine essence.²⁴ We should view this participation in divine essence as an example of *methexis*-participation. Participation scholars sometimes use

²⁰ See Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, pp. 113–44.

²¹ WJE 21: 148. See also Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19 (New Haven: Yale, 2001), pp. 571–2. For the relationship between personhood and essence, see Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*, pp. 40–71.

²² Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon 321. Hebrews 1:3', in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Sermon Series II* (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center, 1734). L. 3v. Edwards also speaks of the divine persons partaking in the divine essence in his 'Sermon 498', L. 4r.

²³ See the Reformed majority view on the aseity of the Son in Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), pp. 152–67.

²⁴ '... though the Son has life in himself because he is possessed of the divine essence, that has life in itself and in an independence, yet the Father has given him to have life in himself'. WJE 21: 147–8.

the term *methexis* as a variety of participation thought that is orientated around shared substance or essence. It can be contrasted with the notion of *koinonia*, which does not imply a shared essence, but rather relational intimacy in differentiation.²⁵ We will see that the Son relates to the Father in a *koinonia* in the Spirit as well. But it remains that the Son partakes of the divine essence by way of a *methexis*, on the basis of the Father's ideation.

If the Son partakes of the divine essence by virtue of the Father's ideation, then how does the Son partake of the divine happiness or love? This is a key question because Edwards' doctrine of God is not complete without the communication of happiness. This communication occurs through the mutual love between the Father and the Son. The Father views himself in the Son, and the Son views himself in himself, and this spirates delight, happiness and love (all synonymous) in the person of the Spirit.²⁶ Very importantly, however, the procession of the Spirit is a sharing in love between the Father and the Son, and not the basis of their sharing in the divine essence. The Father's and Son's participation in the divine essence is established prior (logically, not temporally) to their participation in mutual love. In other words, the Father and the Son can share in divine love – the Holy Spirit – without that act of sharing impinging upon their quiddity.

At this point we must make some careful observations. The Spirit itself partakes of the divine essence by virtue of the Father's and Son's pure act.²⁷ If act and substance cannot be distinguished in God, then the Father's and Son's pure act of love must be substantial and essential. Thus, just as the Son

²⁵ See George Hunsinger's characterisation of *koinonia* as 'unity-in-distinction' in George Hunsinger, 'Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2/3 (2000), pp. 248–9. See also Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 184–5. Torrance uses *koinonia* to describe the Christian participation in the incarnate Son, and thereby in the Trinity. Julie Canlis contrasts Christian *koinonia* (relational participation based on the Trinity) with Platonic accounts of participation marked by shared substantiality in Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 1–24, esp. 9, 13 and 18. Within Edwards studies, see Hastings, *Jonathan Edwards and the Life of God*, pp. 39–40, 56–8, 102, 441–2, 444. Seng-Kong Tan uses the term *koinonia* for relational participation in his *Fullness Received and Returned: Trinity and Participation in Jonathan Edwards* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 118. See also Smith's characterisation of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to *methexis* in James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 98–9. For an account of theosis based on *methexis*, see Daniel Haynes, 'The Metaphysics of Christian Ethics: Radical Orthodoxy and Theosis', *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011), pp. 659–71.

²⁶ '[The Spirit] proceeds from the Son immediately by himself by beholding the Father in himself.' WJE 21: 143.

²⁷ WJE 21: 121.

partakes of the divine essence by virtue of a *methexis*, on the basis of the Father's ideation, so the Spirit partakes of the divine essence by virtue of a *methexis*, on the basis of the Father's and Son's pure act of love. Once again, Edwards utilises *methexis* participation when he is describing the consubstantiality of the persons of the Trinity.

However, while it is true that the Father's and Son's act of mutual love establishes the Spirit's participation in divine essence (*methexis*), it does not work the other way round. The Father–Son mutual love does not establish the Father's and the Son's participation in the divine essence. That is, the Father's and the Son's participation in divine essence (*methexis*) is not dependent upon their communion in the Spirit.²⁸ 'The Son derived the divine essence from the Father, and the Holy Spirit derives the divine essence from the Father and the Son.'²⁹ It is true that their mutual love is logically inevitable and necessary because of their divine essence, but it does not follow that their sharing in the essence is based upon their act of mutual love.³⁰ Classical trinitarian doctrine affirms that each divine person shares the essence of God, but that the persons may be distinguished as to their relations of origin: the Father unoriginate, the Son begotten and the Spirit proceeding.³¹ Edwards is doing something similar here. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit all share one essence, and yet they partake of the essence in distinct ways. While the Spirit's participation in essence is dependent upon the pure act of the Father and the Son, the Father's and Son's participation in the divine essence is logically prior to that act.³²

The Son's two participations *ad intra*: *Methexis* in essence and *koinonia* in fullness

This is important for our current discussion because one can begin to discern two complementary yet distinguishable types of participation: one that is a sharing in essence, undergirding being (*methexis*), and another that is a sharing in love between distinct persons (*koinonia*). In order to make the

²⁸ On the question of interdependence within the Trinity, see WJE 21: 146–7. See also Miscellanies 1062 in Jonathan Edwards, *The 'Miscellanies,'* 833–1152, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 20 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 430.

²⁹ WJE 21: 147. Edwards clarifies immediately that the divine essence is undivided as to its being, but that this does not exclude the idea of personal relations.

³⁰ This is partially true because Edwards came to view the divine essence in personal terms. See Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*, pp. 40–51.

³¹ See Holmes' fifth point in his summary of classical trinitarian doctrine. Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), p. 200.

³² Which is one reason why Edwards cannot speak of the Spirit without the Son being in view, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

koinonia participation more clear, focus again on the Son's relation to the Father. On the one hand, the Son derives essence on the basis of the Father's ideation. This participation explains *being* or quiddity, but Edwards presses further.³³ The Father and the Son relate to one another not merely through the Father's ideation, but on the basis of shared love (the Holy Spirit). Edwards designates this shared love as the 'fullness' of the deity.³⁴ The entrance of this third party (the Holy Spirit, or divine 'fullness'), shared between the Father and the Son, which is not itself the basis of their shared essence, but rather their shared love, propels Edwards into the realm of *koinonia* participation. That is, with the entrance of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, Edwards is no longer talking about shared substance or essence (*methexis*), but rather about relational intimacy in differentiation (*koinonia*).³⁵ Put differently, the Son shares a *methexis* with the deity by virtue of the Father's ideation, but the Son shares a *koinonia* with the Father by virtue of his reception and return of the Holy Spirit (divine fullness). Seng-Kong Tan puts it this way: 'The Son's reception of the Spirit is not a reception of being or essence (as that happens in the Son's generation), but a reception of love or *koinonia*.'³⁶

Essence and fullness *ad extra*: Christology

The essence–fullness distinction develops further in Edwards' christology. Edwards' christology is scattered throughout his writings, but *Miscellanies*

³³ 'I believe Edwards maintains divine-essence language in talking about God's "stuff", his quiddity.' Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*, p. 238.

³⁴ '... the fullness of God consists in the holiness and happiness of the Deity ... the fullness of God consists in the Holy Spirit'. WJE 21: 187–8. It should be pointed out that Edwards sometimes describes the divine fullness as God's understanding and will, which maps in Edwards' thought to the Son and the Spirit (see Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 528). There is no contradiction here, but simply an abbreviation and elaboration. The divine fullness, given in grace, is the Holy Spirit (God's will or love), who bonds the saint to Christ (God's understanding). Thus, whenever Edwards speaks of the divine fullness, he has specific reference to the Spirit, with implied reference to the Son. Strobel refers to this dual aspect as God's 'communicable natures' (Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of Theosis').

³⁵ Hunsinger characterises *koinonia* as 'unity-in-distinction'. George Hunsinger, 'Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2/3 (Nov. 2000), p. 248.

³⁶ Tan, *Fullness Received and Returned*, p. 118. This is strengthened by the fact that Edwards explicitly invokes the New Testament *koinonia* tradition, citing 2 Cor. 13:14, in developing this idea. See WJE 21: 187–8.

487 is his ‘charter’ entry on the subject.³⁷ Crucially, Edwards asserts that the bond of union between the Logos and the human Jesus (divine and human natures) is the Holy Spirit, and he identifies this Holy Spirit bond between the two natures as the divine fullness.³⁸ In the incarnation, God the Father loves the human Jesus with the same love he pours out upon the eternal Logos; thus the human Jesus and the divine Logos share the Father’s love. This sharing in the Father’s love establishes a communion between them.³⁹ Edwards defined ‘communion’ as two parties sharing a third thing, some sort of good, between them.⁴⁰ The Logos and the human Jesus share in a common good, namely, the Father’s love, which Edwards explicitly identifies as the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Further, the union is not only a communion of love, it is also a communion of personal faculties. This union of faculties – understanding and will – causes the divine Logos and the human Jesus to be one subject and thereby return divine love to the Father. The consciousness or personality of the human Jesus is indistinguishable from the consciousness of the Logos, except for the creaturely limitations implied in Jesus’ humanity.⁴²

Why is this important for our present question? It is important because Edwards’ christology shows that two diverse essences – one human and one divine – are able to partake of divine fullness, love, Holy Spirit, without that participation bearing upon the quiddity of either. We observed earlier that the *koinonia* in the Spirit between the Father and the Son (*ad intra*) was not the basis of their participation in the essence of the Godhead. Their communion in the Spirit does not impinge upon their essential participation, because their essential participation in the Godhead is established prior (logically). This is also true in Edwards’ christology. The *koinonia* or communion in the Spirit between the Logos and the human Jesus does not imply any change in quiddity. The incarnate Christ can share in the divine fullness, without measure, without in any way undermining the coherence of his human

³⁷ Robert W. Caldwell, III, *Communion in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit as the Bond of Union in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), p. 85, n. 35.

³⁸ Miscellanies 487. Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 528–9.

³⁹ WJE 13: 529–30.

⁴⁰ WJE 21: 188.

⁴¹ WJE 13: 529.

⁴² Thus preserving the characteristically Reformed *finitum non capax infiniti* as well as the extra Calvinisticum. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), pp. 1393, 1403. See also Caldwell, *Communion in the Spirit*, pp. 94–5; and Tan, *Fullness Received and Returned*, p. 196.

nature.⁴³ Thus Edwards is consistent between his doctrine of the Trinity and his doctrine of Christ – in both cases the communion in the divine fullness does not impinge upon quiddity, being or essence. Rather, it effects relatedness and goodness. The divine fullness implies intimacy of relatedness, and distinction between the related parties.

Essence and fullness: Special grace

Edwards emphasised the continuity between the hypostatic union in Christ with the mystical union of believers with Christ.⁴⁴ In doing so, he synchronised his doctrines of grace and christology, without making them identical. 'There is a likeness between the union of the Logos with the man Christ Jesus and the union of Christ with the church, though there be in the former great peculiarities.'⁴⁵ And Edwards is clear on the nature of the likeness: the union between the Logos and the human Jesus is by the Spirit, and the same is true for the union between the church and Christ. Edwards fleshes this out in, what is by now, the familiar language of divine fullness. The fullness of Christ is the fullness given in grace.⁴⁶ This justifies relating the insights we have observed about christological fullness to Edwards' discussions of divine fullness in grace. Christological fullness and the fullness given in divine grace are closely analogous: both represent the Holy Spirit as a bond of love.⁴⁷ This explains why Edwards can so closely relate the 'intimacy' between the Logos and the human Jesus with the 'intimacy' between God and the saint in grace: 'the divine Logos has been pleased to assume [the manhood of Christ] into his very person; and therefore, we may conclude that no degree of intimacy will be too great for

⁴³ Taking 'human nature' to be a concrete instance of a kind essence. See Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 40; and Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 10, n. 19.

⁴⁴ This is in contrast to many in the Reformed tradition. See Caldwell, *Communion in the Spirit*, pp. 86–7.

⁴⁵ Miscellanies 487. See WJE 13: 528.

⁴⁶ Miscellanies 487. WJE 13: 529.

⁴⁷ This continuity between christological fullness and the fullness given in grace is apparent in Edwards' sermons. See Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon 180. John 1:16', in *Sermons, Series II, 1729–1731*, WJE Online, vol. 45 (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University, undated). This also explains why Edwards can echo (whether consciously or not) the classical 'exchange formula' so often associated with deification tradition: '[Christ] became in all things like unto us that his disciples should in many things become like unto him . . .' Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 290.

others to be admitted to, of whom Christ is the head or chief, according to their capacity'.⁴⁸

It is important to point out that there are important differences between the christological hypostatic union and the mystical union of grace. First, Christ is the head and source of grace, and the church, as his body, depends upon him immediately for their reception of divine fullness.⁴⁹ Secondly, whereas Christ partakes of divine fullness without measure,⁵⁰ the church does according to its members' capacity.⁵¹ Finally, the hypostatic union effects a personal union of consciousness, whereas this does not occur in the mystical union of grace.⁵² Nevertheless it remains that in both the christological hypostatic union and in the mystical union of grace, *koinonia* in divine fullness (the Holy Spirit or divine love) joins creator and creature without implying any change to their ontological essences.

And here we arrive at a critical juncture. We have seen that the divine fullness that characterises Christ's hypostatic union is given, in measure and according to creaturely capacities, to the believers in grace. However, not only is the divine fullness of grace christological fullness, it is also trinitarian fullness. That is, the divine fullness communicated in grace is a participation in the trinitarian union between the Father and the Son.⁵³ Edwards concludes the sermon *The Excellency of Christ* with these momentous words: 'This was the design of Christ . . . that the church should be as it were admitted into the society of the blessed Trinity.'⁵⁴

Edwards could hardly be more specific. The gift of grace is a gift of admission to the society of the Trinity. The believer is caught up in Christ and allowed to partake of the *koinonia* of the Trinity: the mutual love between the Father and the Son, in the Spirit. This article has followed the theme of divine fullness from its roots in the Trinity *ad intra*, through its economic expression in the doctrine of Christ and now to the soteriological doctrine of grace. And a key aim throughout has been to show that Edwards views the

⁴⁸ Miscellanies 741. Jonathan Edwards, *The 'Miscellanies'*, Entry Nos. 501–832, ed. Ava Chamberlain, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 368.

⁴⁹ Miscellanies 487. WJE 13: 529.

⁵⁰ Miscellanies 487. WJE 13: 528. See also Miscellanies 764b, WJE 18: 411.

⁵¹ WJE 19: 593.

⁵² Yet the mystical union in grace does synchronise the faculties of the saint with the Trinity, though the saints remain distinct subjects. WJE 13: 495. See also Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 441.

⁵³ WJE 19: 593.

⁵⁴ WJE 19: 594.

divine fullness to be fundamentally the same in each case: it is the *koinonia* of the Spirit, partaken in different ways in each situation. The Father and the Son *ad intra* partake infinitely. In the economy, Christ incarnate partakes without measure. The believers, in turn, partake finitely. However, the *koinonia* in the divine fullness remains constant in both content and in character throughout. The content is the same because it is the same Spirit who acts as love between two parties. The character is constant because it is, in each case, a *koinonia*, a sharing in intimacy between two parties who remain distinct. Thomas Torrance captures a vision that fits very nicely with Edwards' when he states:

The participation of the Church . . . in Christ must be construed in terms of *koinonia* governed by the Chalcedonian doctrine of the union of two natures in Christ. This is a participation in which the human nature of the participant is not deified but reaffirmed and recreated in its essence as human nature, yet one in which the participant is really united to the Incarnate Son of God partaking in him in his own appropriate mode of the oneness of the Son and the Father . . . , through the Holy Spirit . . . The mystery of grace is the mystery of Christ.⁵⁵

With this in place, we return to the questions we raised in the Introduction, before drawing the article to a conclusion.

Essence and fullness: Evaluating the distinction

Bruce McCormack and Myk Habets have both, in different ways, rejected the Palamite distinction between essence and energies. The validity of their critique is outside the scope of this article. Rather, these critiques can help evaluate Edwards' distinction, and I have turned them into questions directed at his distinction. We will look at these questions in turn, and relate the findings of the article as a whole to each.

The first question is this: is there a coherent difference between the divine essence and the divine fullness in Edwards's thought? If so, what is it?

It is fair to say that Edwards' distinction between God's essence and God's fullness can provoke the reader to ask whether this is a distinction without a difference. Is he denying essential union with God, while in the next moment affirming it, but with different terms? In other words, does this distinction resolve to a verbal trick?

This article finds that Edwards' distinction is not a verbal trick, that there is a real difference between the divine essence and the divine fullness. Further, the difference between the divine essence and the divine fullness obtains with a striking consistency throughout his theology. The distinction is rooted in

⁵⁵ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 185–6.

his doctrine of the Trinity, maintained in his doctrine of Christ, and applied to the saint in his theology of special grace.

In his doctrine of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all share in the same divine essence. Yet at the same time, the Father and the Son participate in the Holy Spirit without this participation establishing or impinging on their participation in essence. This mutual sharing in the Holy Spirit is the divine fullness. Essence and fullness are distinguishable in God *ad intra*.

This theme carries on, and becomes clearer, in Edwards' christology. Following the Chalcedonian tradition, the Son's divine essence and Jesus' human essence are never mixed or made consubstantial together; their integrity remains. Yet, at the same time, the two essences are united in a personal union. For Edwards, this union is a communion in divine fullness: the Spirit. The Logos and the human Jesus are able to share the divine fullness, without the divine fullness establishing or impinging on either essence. This echoes the communion in divine fullness between the Father and the Son. However, in the incarnation, we see something new, and vitally important for the creator–creature relation: the divine fullness may be shared between two parties whose essences differ. Essence and fullness differ in Christ incarnate.

This theme carries on, once again, in the doctrine of special grace. God unites the saint to Christ by granting the divine fullness (the Spirit) to the saint according to the saint's creaturely capacity to receive it and return it. This is a relational union of love, but not one in which the essence of the saint is compromised, nor one in which the divine essence is communicated. Just as the Father and the Son are united by the Spirit without this establishing or impinging upon their participation in the divine essence, and just as the Logos and the human Jesus share the divine fullness without this establishing or impinging upon their differentiated essences, so Christ and the saint share the divine fullness without this establishing or impinging upon their essences. Essence and fullness differ in special grace.

All of this argues that the divine essence and the divine fullness differ in both the content that is shared, and the character of the sharing. They differ in content in that whereas essence is a category of being, fullness is a category of relationality.⁵⁶ Thus, when Edwards speaks of the saints partaking of the divine fullness, but not of the divine essence, he means that the saint is united in love to Christ, in the Spirit, thus sharing in the society of the Trinity, but without any abrogation to the saint's created being. That there is a real content difference between essence and fullness is underscored by Edwards' use of the notion of degree. The notion of essence implies a binary

⁵⁶ Strobel points out that this relational focus is distinctively *Reformed*. See Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of *Theosis*', pp. 397–8.

option: either one has an essence or one does not have an essence, but one cannot have a small amount of an essence. However, when Edwards speaks of the communication of divine fullness, he regularly speaks in terms of degree. That is, the divine fullness is given in finite degree according to the capacity of the creature.⁵⁷ God may communicate a small amount of the divine fullness to the saint, and increase this amount over time. This sets the stage for an eternal progression of increasing participation in divine fullness.⁵⁸ Essence and fullness differ in content.

This content difference then implies two characters of participation. To partake of an essence is a distinguishable sort of participation from partaking of the divine fullness. The first is a *methexis* in being, and the second is a *koinonia* between distinct parties. Both types of participation are present in Edwards, but they fulfil complementary functions. Essence and fullness differ, then, in that one rests upon *methexis*-participation, and therefore is always primarily concerned with quiddity, whereas the other rests upon *koinonia*-participation, and therefore is always primarily concerned with relationality.

We therefore answer the question above by stating, yes, there is a coherent difference between essence and fullness in Edwards' thought: they differ both in content and in character of participation, and this difference is consistent through Edwards' doctrines of the Trinity, christology and special grace. What then, of the second question?

The second question is this: does this distinction drive a wedge between God's immanent and economic life, or between God's being and act?

One of Myk Habet's critiques of the Palamite essence-energies distinction is that it implies a wedge between God's being and God's act. If God's essence is entirely transcendent and inaccessible for the creature, and God is accessible only through God's energies, then it would appear that God's energies (his acts toward creation) and God's essence differ in some way.⁵⁹ Habets argues that the *homoousion* of the Nicæan Creed shatters such a strong differentiation. *Homoousion* implies that God revealed his being – his *ousia* – in his economic action in Christ. Thus, to rend asunder essence and energies – being and act – is to undermine the reality of Christ's full divinity, remaking him into an intermediary between God and creation, rather than God himself. The same

⁵⁷ See for instance WJE 2: 203. See also Edwards' "Unpublished Letter on Assurance and Participation in the Divine Nature", in WJE 8: 638–9.

⁵⁸ On eternal increase and progress in divine participation, see WJE 8: 431–2, 533–6.

⁵⁹ Or at least God's immanent and economic modalities differ in some respect. See Habets, "Reformed Theosis?" A Response', p. 494. See also McCormack, 'Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No', pp. 373–4.

line of thought goes for the Spirit as well. This is a formidable critique, and one that would significantly undermine any classical Christian theology.⁶⁰

Based on all that has gone before in this article, I argue that Edwards' distinction does not fall victim to Habets' critique for two reasons: first, Edwards maintains a strong continuity between the divine fullness *ad intra* and the divine fullness *ad extra*. That is, the economic activity of God in grace is patterned on the immanent activity of God in the Trinity. Secondly, Edwards maintains the union of God's being and act, precisely because the divine fullness is a divine person (the Holy Spirit), who is mediated by a divine person (the incarnate Christ). I will take these in turn.

One of the striking elements of the Northampton pastor's theology is the way he replicates theology proper in his soteriology. The relational dynamic that describes the inner trinitarian relations is, in a modified way, the same dynamic that describes the work of grace in the heart of the saint. This is so much so that Kyle Strobel calls Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity 'religious affection in pure act'.⁶¹ The fullness of grace is the fullness of the Trinity *ad intra*: it is a partaking with the Father and the Son in their good, which is the Holy Spirit.⁶² Similarly, the fullness of grace is the fullness of Christ, which is also the Holy Spirit.⁶³ It is true that there is a modification at each point, but fundamentally the point remains that Edwards means the same thing when speaking of divine fullness *ad intra* and *ad extra*.⁶⁴ The theological distinction between God's immanent and economic life remains, but they are so closely related that they can mutually inform each other. Thus, Edwards' employment of divine fullness does not imply any disjoining of God's immanent and economic life.

Further, Edwards' theology of grace maintains union between God's act and being. It is crucial to see that in Edwards' doctrine of grace, God's act of communicating divine fullness is God's gift of himself. As we have seen throughout this article, divine fullness is the Holy Spirit. And this same Holy Spirit partakes of the divine *essence*, just as the Father and the Son. The Spirit

⁶⁰ I am setting aside the question of whether or not Habets has adequately represented the Eastern view.

⁶¹ Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology*, p. 70.

⁶² 'Hence our communion with God the Father and God the Son consists in our partaking of the Holy Ghost, which is their Spirit: for to have communion or fellowship with another, is to partake with them of their good in their fullness, in union and society with them.' WJE 21: 188.

⁶³ WJE 21: 190.

⁶⁴ For instance, see WJE 13: 495. See also Miscellanies 1082. WJE 20: 466.

partakes of the essence of God on the basis of the pure act tradition,⁶⁵ and therefore Edwards unites God's being and God's act.

This has significant implications for Edwards' doctrine of grace. Grace is this same act of God poured out toward the creature. Therefore, and we must say this strongly, when God gives grace, God is giving himself, in an essential person of the Trinity. Just as traditional theology always claimed Christ as *homoousion* with the Father, so Edwards's doctrine of the Holy Spirits requires us to say that the divine fullness, given in grace, is *homoousion* with the Father and the Son, because it is the Holy Spirit.

The critical reader will see a possible inconsistency, however. If the Holy Spirit is the divine essence, poured out in love, and if the Holy Spirit is the divine fullness given in grace, then how can Edwards still claim that the divine fullness is communicated without implying a communication of divine essence? This objection is addressed in ground already covered. Throughout Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity *ad intra*, christology and grace, two parties can share the divine fullness without that participation implying any communication of the divine essence. The communication of the divine fullness (the Holy Spirit) is a *koinonia*, a relational sharing between distinct parties. It is not, however, a *methexis*: the communication of the divine fullness is not a fusing, mixing, or sharing in being. Perhaps the Chalcedonian grammar may serve as a precedent. Just as the divine Logos may unite to the human Jesus without implying a communication of divine essence to the creature, so in Edwards, the Holy Spirit (divine fullness) is given to creatures without implying any change in the creature's quiddity. It is a bold assertion, but not one that is wholly unprecedented in the history of doctrine.⁶⁶

Thus, while it is true that the divine essence is incommunicable to the creature, it is not precisely true to say that the divine essence is *inaccessible*. The divine essence is given in the gift of Christ, but not communicated to the creature. The divine essence is also given in the gift of special grace

⁶⁵ WJE 21: 121.

⁶⁶ A complementary argument to the one above grows out of Kyle Strobel's work on the communicable natures in the Trinity. God's tri-personhood is achieved through a perichoretic sharing among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all share the same understanding (the Son) and the same will (the Spirit) perichoretically. Thus, the natures of understanding and will are sharable (communicable) within the Trinity. Strobel points out that a similar sharing happens within the economy when these natures are shared with the saint. In this case, the divine essence is not communicated to the saint by virtue of the finitude and christological mediation that is involved. Finitude and christological mediation serve to strain out the divine essence. Thus, God communicates his understanding and will without communicating his essence. See Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of *Theosis*'.

(divine fullness, the Holy Spirit), but it is not communicated to the saint. What is communicated is a sharing in the divine act of love, binding distinct parties together.

All of this means that, for Jonathan Edwards, grace is genuinely *uncreated*, and that it is not a sort of semi-divine intermediary. Rather, grace is God's gift of himself. McCormack argues that the Palamite essence–energies distinction can only make sense if the energies are taken for a sort of created grace. Similarly Habets concludes that the energies must be an intermediary sort of reality. Regardless of whether this adequately reflects Palamism, neither conclusion fits Edwards. Divine fullness is *homoousion* with the Father and the Son, but the gift of divine fullness is a relational gift of sharing between beings that retains their essential and ontological integrity. This is the achievement of Edwards' distinction between the divine essence, not communicated in grace, and the divine fullness, which is communicated. This is the way in which Edwards is able to achieve such intimacy between God and creature that he can rightly call grace a divine participation, but without collapsing the ontological chasm between them.