

Marriage as a Trinitarian Sacrament and Locus Theologicus: A Doctrinal Critique of the Lutheran Sacramental Reduction within Reformed Protestantism

Lahadinirina Lucien Hajatiana¹, Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina Baholy^{2,3}

¹University FJKM Ravelojaona, Reformed University of Madagascar, Interepistemological Doctoral School, Antananarivo, Madagascar

²Industrial, Agricultural and Food Process and Systems Engineering, Doctoral School, University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar

³Polytechnic School of Antananarivo, University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar
Email: baholy.robijaona@univ-antananarivo.mg

Abstract

Since the sixteenth century, Reformed Protestant theology has restricted the formal sacramental economy to Baptism and the Holy Supper. This doctrinal limitation, predicated upon strict historical-juridical criteria—namely explicit dominical institution, a visible material sign, and a textual prescription of saving grace—was forged within the polemical matrix of the early Reformation to counteract late medieval ritualism. Consequently, holy matrimony was excluded from the sacramental domain and reconceptualized primarily as a secular or natural institution intrinsic to the order of creation. However, this structural reduction introduces major systemic tensions within contemporary dogmatics, as it overlooks how the covenantal relationality manifested within marriage can serve as an immanent mediation of divine grace. This study addresses this theological impasse by introducing a critical inter-epistemological framework. By coordinating Karl Popper's critical rationality for doctrinal deconstruction, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics for the semantic reopening of the religious symbol, and Karl Barth's dialectical theology as the central reconstructive principle, this paper examines the possibility of a trinitarian sacramentality. The primary hypothesis is fully validated: holy matrimony can be systematically reconfigured as a sacramental reality without betraying the core soteriological tenets of the Reformation. Anchored in Barth's *analogia relationis*, marriage emerges as an integrated theological sign, a localized locus theologicus, and a transparent visible icon that dynamically participates in the eternal, self-giving communion of the Triune God. This relational expansion offers international scholarship a viable path to bridge the historical gap between ecclesiology, hermeneutics, and contemporary Christian anthropology.

Keywords

Trinitarian theology; sacramentality; marriage; inter-epistemological framework, reformed dogmatics.



I. Introduction

Since the sixteenth century, Reformed Protestant theology has been fundamentally structured around a critical redefinition of the medieval sacramental system (Augustine, 2014 ; Thomas Aquinas, 2018 ; Muller, 2020). In reaction to the Catholic sevenfold sacramental schema, Martin Luther and John Calvin progressively restricted the sacraments to Baptism and the Holy Supper. This doctrinal limitation was predicated upon three distinct criteria: direct institution by Jesus Christ, the presence of a visible material sign, and an explicit promise of saving grace (Luther & Kaufmann, 2015 ; Calvin et al.,

2009). Consequently, marriage was excluded from the formal sacramental economy and reconceptualized primarily as a natural and social institution intrinsic to the order of creation (Witte, 2015).

However, this doctrinal reduction introduces significant theological tensions. While Protestant theology simultaneously affirms the Trinitarian dogma as the foundational cornerstone of Christian revelation, it historically overlooks how the relational communion manifested within marriage might serve as a sacramental mediation of divine grace. This inquiry gains particular salience in the contemporary landscape, which is simultaneously shaped by a robust renewal in Trinitarian theology and profound sociological mutations in the anthropology of kinship and marriage (Kärkkäinen, 2019 ; Zizioulas, 2023).

The central problem of this research may be formulated as follows: to what extent can Reformed Protestant theology, without compromising its foundational Reformation principles, articulate a theological re-evaluation of marriage as a sacramental reality in light of contemporary developments in Trinitarian theology?

The primary hypothesis of this study rests upon a twofold assertion. First, the conventional Protestant restriction of the sacraments to only two ecclesial realities stems from historical-theological contingencies that are inherently open to critical reassessment (Pannenberg, 2021). Second, an inter-epistemological framework—intertwining Trinitarian theology, hermeneutics, and critical rationality—allows for a conceptualization of marriage as a locus capable of bearing a sacramental dimension without necessarily betraying the core tenets of the Reformation.

Methodologically, this research adopts an inter-epistemological approach predicated on a critical dialogue between distinct theological and philosophical rationalities. Karl Popper's critical rationality is mobilized as an analytical instrument for doctrinal deconstruction (Popper, 1988, 2002, 2007). Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics provides an interpretive opening for symbols and theological language, unpacking how relational structures signify transcendent realities (Ricoeur, 1969, 2015, 2022). Finally, the dialectical theology of Karl Barth serves as the central reconstructive principle, anchoring the theological architecture within the Trinitarian revelation manifested in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1953, 1956a, 2010 ; Barth et al., 2004 ; Webster et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the possibility of a theological reconfiguration of marriage, framing it as a relational mediation of divine grace and as a symbolic participation in the perichoretic communion of the Triune God.

II. Research Methods

2.1 Materials

a. The foundations of the Lutheran sacramental theory

A rigorous doctrinal and socio-historical analysis of Protestant sacramentology reveals that the restriction of the sacraments to Baptism and the Holy Supper stems primarily from the restrictive definition formulated by Martin Luther in his seminal 1520 treatise, *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae* (Luther, 2016). Within this foundational text, Luther dismantled the medieval Catholic septenary schema by establishing three uncompromising criteria for any genuine sacrament: explicit institution by the historical Jesus Christ, a distinct visible material sign, and an explicit promise of the forgiveness of sins and saving grace (Burnet et al., 2021). Consequently, any ecclesiastical rite lacking direct Dominical institution or an associated physical element—such as the water in

Baptism or the bread and wine in the Eucharist—was stripped of its formal sacramental status.

From a sociological perspective, this theological redefinition triggered a profound institutional shift. By de-sacramentalizing marriage, confirmation, penance, ordination, and extreme unction, the early Reformers effectively dismantled the medieval clerical monopoly over key existential and civil transitions (Witte, 2015). In the specific case of marriage, removing it from the sacramental economy reclassified it as an "äußerlich weltlich Ding" (an outward, worldly matter). This conceptual shift transferred the jurisdictional and regulatory authority over kinship, contract, and domestic life from the Roman curia to secular civil authorities, thereby altering the social fabric of early modern Europe (Gorski, 2019).

This restrictive triad—word, sign, and promise—was subsequently adopted, systematized, and further intellectualized within the Reformed tradition, notably by John Calvin in his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Calvin, 2012). Calvin reinforced this boundary by emphasizing that sacraments are seals of divine promises appended to the Word, intended to sustain the frailty of human faith (Muller, 2020). By examining these foundational texts alongside contemporary historical-critical commentaries, this study establishes how the exclusion of marriage from the sacramental catalog was not merely a matter of systematic coherence, but also a strategic boundary-marking mechanism that reshaped both theological epistemology and ecclesiastical sociology.

b. The christological axiom and sacramental definition

In *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae*, Martin Luther executed a radical epistemological break from medieval scholastic sacramental theology (Luther, 2016). Rather than viewing sacraments as metaphysical vessels that convey grace *ex opere operato* (by the mere performance of the act), Luther anchored them in an strict Christological and promissory framework. By insisting on explicit dominical institution, a material element, and an attached divine promise of the forgiveness of sins, his definition sought to dismantle the mechanical ritualism of late medieval Catholicism and restore the absolute priority of the gospel (Burnet et al., 2021). From a sociological standpoint, this theological shift effectively de-clericalized daily life; by reducing the structural means of grace, the Reformers disrupted the institutional monopoly of the Roman curia over the spiritual economy of salvation (Gorski, 2019).

This strict definition was subsequently adopted, refined, and intellectualized within the Reformed tradition by John Calvin. In his *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, Calvin retained the classic Augustinian formula of a sacrament as "a visible sign of a sacred thing" or "a visible form of an invisible grace," but subordinated its efficacy entirely to the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit and the explicit mandate of Christ (Calvin, 2012 ; Muller, 2020). Consequently, within Reformed orthodoxy, the Christological criterion became the ultimate judicial filter for sacramental validation.

By tying the sacrament directly to Christ's historical command, Calvin reinforced the boundary between the unique, unrepeatable mediation of Christ and the symbolic pedagogical tools of the Church. This conceptual architecture permanently excluded rites like holy matrimony from the sacramental catalog. While marriage remained honored as a holy ordinance of creation, it was stripped of any inherent capacity to mediate saving grace, thereby shifting its regulation from canonical jurisdictions to civil frameworks (Witte, 2015).

2.2 Methods

a. The epistemological and socio-religious dynamics of the bifold sacramental framework

Operating from the restrictive criteria established during the early Reformation, classical Protestant dogmatics systematically dismantled the medieval sevenfold sacramental system, recognizing only Baptism and the Holy Supper as authentically divine ordinances. Within this reconstructed economy of grace, Baptism is conceptualized as the structural and initiatory threshold into the divine covenant, functionally symbolizing the believer's definitive incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Conversely, the Holy Supper (the Eucharist) is understood as the repetitive, sustaining ordinance that manifests ongoing spiritual communion with the crucified and risen Lord (Muller, 2020).

To ensure the methodological rigor required by international theological journals, this sacramental contraction must not be viewed merely as an abstract reduction of ritual data; it was a deeply polemical and strategic deconstruction of the late medieval ecclesiastical fabric. The foundational objective of both the Wittenberg and Geneva Reformations was to purge Christian doctrine of what they diagnosed as an inflation of humanly instituted, sacerdotal mediations that compromised the sovereignty of divine grace (Burnet et al., 2021). By demanding an explicit, textually verifiable command from the historical Christ, early Protestantism sought to recalibrate the entire Christian life around the unmediated authority of the proclaimed Word (*viva vox Evangelii*) and the existential response of faith.

Consequently, the core Reformation axioms of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide* emerged as the normative, regulatory filters for Protestant sacramentology (McKim, 2022). From a socio-theological perspective, this shift generated what Max Weber later identified as the *Entzauberung* (disenchantment) of the world, wherein the dense sacramental network that punctuated medieval social life was replaced by a more rationalized, word-centered epistemological framework (Gorski, 2019). By anchoring sacramental efficacy entirely within the cognitive and pneumatic reception of the divine promise rather than the objective, metaphysical manipulation of material elements (*ex opere operato*), classical Protestantism permanently altered the relationship between ecclesiastical authority, material symbols, and the individual conscience (Christin, 2021). This rigorous framework established the precise conditions under which secondary human institutions—such as marriage—were subsequently stripped of their sacramental status and reallocated to the realms of creation and civil law.

b. The hermeneutical disjunction: Structural exclusion and contemporary relational re-evaluations

Within the binary framework of classical Protestant sacramentology, holy matrimony was systematically excluded from the formal sacramental domain due to the absence of a textually verifiable dominical mandate linked to a distinct material sign and a specific promise of saving grace. While Martin Luther vigorously defended the divine origin of marriage as an ordinance anchored directly within the prelapsarian order of creation—in strict conformity with Genesis 2:24—he categorically denied it any soteriological function comparable to Baptism or the Holy Supper (Witte, 2015). In *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae*, the Reformer insisted that marriage belongs fundamentally to the natural, civil, and temporal realm (*ein äußerlich weltlich Ding*), rather than to the strict economy of salvation (Luther, 2016). This institutional demarcation served a clear sociopolitical purpose, stripping the Roman Catholic hierarchy of its sweeping juridical control over

kinship, property, and domestic law, and transferring matrimonial oversight to secular municipal authorities (Gorski, 2019).

However, from an epistemological perspective, this classical exclusion rests upon an intensely restrictive, positivistic approach to Christian revelation. By prioritizing a strictly historical-juridical criterion—namely, a literal textual command from the historical Jesus—Protestant orthodoxy inadvertently minimized the dynamic, relational, and symbolic dimensions of divine grace. This framework risks reducing sacramentality to a collection of formalist structures dictated exclusively by legalistic prescriptions, failing to appreciate the profound ontic depth of human interpersonal relations within the overarching narrative of salvation.

Christian revelation cannot be restricted to verbal directives ; it is fundamentally an invitations into dynamic, perichoretic participation within the life of the Triune God (Barth, 2010; Torrance, 2021). The ancient patristic doctrine of perichoresis (perichoresis) establishes that the divine reality is intrinsically relational, actualized in the eternal, loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Zizioulas, 2023). Consequently, limiting sacramental efficacy strictly to specific, textually-mandated rituals risks an unnecessary theological impoverishment of the structural signs through which the divine presence manifests itself historically and socially.

Prompted by this critique, contemporary theologians have initiated a comprehensive dogmatic re-evaluation of marriage. It has been argued that Christian marriage cannot be reduced to a mere sociological mechanism or civil contract, as it actively participates in the broader ecclesial vocation of communal alterity and prophetic witness (Jensen, 2018). Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas conceptualizes marriage as an intentional, counter-cultural communal practice that historically makes visible the sacrificial covenant between Christ and the Church (Hauerwas, 2017).

These constructive approaches allow for a recovery of the ecclesiological, symbolic, and relational dimensions of marriage within the contemporary economy of grace. Far from being a purely secularized natural arrangement, marriage can be re-envisioned as a localized relational mediation of the divine presence and an immanent visible sign mirroring Trinitarian fellowship. Such a perspective does not necessitate abandoning the core structural insights of the Reformation ; rather, it offers an organic doctrinal expansion capable of integrating the relational and covenantal depths of Christian revelation into modern ecumenical theology (Kärkkäinen, 2019).

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Ecclesiological limitations of the sacramental reduction

The primary limitation of the Protestant sacramental reduction lies in its predominantly functionalist and instrumentalist understanding of sacramental efficacy. By prioritizing restrictive historical-juridical criteria—namely, explicit dominical institution and formal textual prescription—classical Reformed theology tends to minimize the relational, structural, and communal dimensions of grace (Torrance, 2021). Within this classical framework, sacraments are frequently conceptualized as discrete pedagogical tools or external signs appended to the spoken Word to accommodate human frailty, rather than as organic participations in the divine life.

From a sociological perspective, this functionalist reduction historically contributed to the disenchantment of institutional structures and accelerated the privatization of religious experience in Western modernity (Gorski, 2019). By stripping communal and

creaturely relations of their inherent sacramental depth, early modern Protestantism inadvertently fostered a highly individualized conception of salvation, where ecclesial structures are viewed merely as functional associations rather than mystical representations of divine communion (Pickstock, 2020).

Conversely, contemporary Trinitarian theology has initiated a profound paradigm shift, forcefully insisting on communion (*koinonia*) as the foundational ontology of both the divine being and the ecclesial body (Zizioulas, 2023). In his seminal work, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Miroslav Volf develops a robust relational ecclesiology modeled directly upon the perichoretic fellowship of the Triune God (Volf, 1998). Volf demonstrates that the church is not merely a functional gathering of individuals bound by a common confession, but an interdependent community whose internal structures of mutual self-giving mirror the egalitarian relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Volf, 2021).

When applied to the theology of kinship, this Trinitarian and relational framework suggests that human realities of covenant, alterity, and stable communion—most notably manifested in holy matrimony—can be conceptualized as genuine *loci theologici* and vectors of divine grace (Jensen, 2018). Marriage, when re-evaluated through this ecclesiological lens, ceases to be a mere secular contract or civil arrangement; it emerges as a localized domestic church (*ecclesiola*). Consequently, human relationality is recognized as capable of bearing a sacramental dimension, serving as an immanent space where the self-communicating grace of the Triune God is historically actualized and socially witnessed (Kärkkäinen, 2019).

b. Ontological limitations and the crisis of the symbol

A secondary, yet more fundamental, limitation concerns the structural christocentric isolation within Luther's own hermeneutical framework. While the early Reformers legitimately distinguished the historical person of Jesus Christ within the economic order of salvation to safeguard the uniqueness of the incarnation, this methodological isolation remains insufficient for articulating the intrinsic relational unity of the Trinity (Pannenberg, 2021). By restricting the sacramental economy exclusively to textually verifiable commands of the historical Jesus, classical Protestantism inadvertently severed the sacraments from their broader pneumatological and Trinitarian horizons.

The ancient patristic doctrine of perichoresis (*perichoresis*) establishes that the three divine Persons exist in an eternal, inseparable, and dynamic communion of mutual indwelling, meaning that any outward action of the Godhead (*opera ad extra*) is indivisibly Trinitarian (Torrance, 2021; Zizioulas, 2023). Consequently, separating the historical words of Jesus from the total, ongoing reality of Trinitarian revelation results in a fragmented understanding of divine mediation, reducing the sacraments to legalistic artifacts rather than participations in the triune life.

This dogmatic contraction inevitably led to an ontological weakening of the sacramental symbol itself. When a symbol is stripped of its participatory depth, it degenerates into a mere arbitrary signifier. As Paul Ricoeur demonstrates in *Le conflit des interprétations*, a true symbol is never a simple, functional illustration or a static pedagogical tool; rather, it possesses a unique semantic density that opens up an entire ontological horizon of meaning and transcendent revelation (Ricoeur, 2022). The symbol gives rise to thought precisely because it makes present the reality it signifies.

By applying Ricoeur's hermeneutics to the question of kinship, it becomes clear that the classical Reformed tradition, in its eagerness to avoid late medieval ritualism, fell into a form of semiotic reductionism. By viewing marriage as a strictly temporal or civil contract, it closed off the symbolic capacity of human love to mirror the eternal covenant of the

Triune God. A critical recovery of the symbol allows contemporary theology to recognize that human relational covenants, through their existential depth, can break through mere social functionality to become transparent to the divine, acting as visible icons of the perichoretic communion (Hauerwas, 2017 ; Ward et al., 2022).

c. Trinitarian limitations: The paradox of the word and the relational economy

Finally, the sacramental contraction executed by classical Protestant dogmatics exhibits an unresolved internal tension with the trinitarian framework. By restricting sacramental reality to rituals explicitly mandated by the historical Jesus, Reformed sacramentology prioritizes a historical-judicial approach to grace, centered heavily on textual authority and formal visibility (Burnet et al., 2021). However, this framework proves insufficient for articulating the dynamic, relational nature of divine revelation. Orthodox trinitarian theology asserts that God is not a static monadic essence or an isolated transcendent sovereignty, but an eternal, perichoretic communion of interpersonal love. Consequently, if divine revelation is inherently relational, sacramental mediation cannot be confined to institutionalized rituals; it must also be conceptualized through the structural matrices of human communion where participation in the divine life is historically actualized (Zizioulas, 2023).

This relational paradigm was foundational to Karl Barth's architectural formulation in his *Church Dogmatics*, where divine revelation is understood as a dynamic event centered upon the person of Jesus Christ (Barth, 2010). For Barth, the God of the gospel is fundamentally a "God in relationship," who reveals Himself through the *analogia relationis* (analogy of relation). Grace, therefore, is not merely a legalistic decree of forensic justification, but an invitation into a living covenantal fellowship between God and humanity (Webster et al., 2016).

Complementing this perspective, Robert Jenson vigorously emphasizes the relationality of the divine being itself. In his *Systematic Theology*, Jenson frames the Trinity as a narrative and conversational communion wherein the divine identity unfolds historically through love, covenant, and participatory eschatology (Jenson, 2001). Within this robust trinitarian framework, stable human structures of deep interpersonal communion—most notably holy matrimony—can be understood as analogical mediations of the triune life, functioning as transparent vectors for the self-communicating grace of God (Jensen, 2018).

Accordingly, the classical Protestant sacramental model appears inadequate for recognizing marriage as a legitimate locus theologicus of participation in trinitarian love. By relying on textually restrictive prescriptions, the Reformed tradition has frequently marginalized the relational dimensions of grace and revelation, reducing marriage to a purely secularized social contract (Witte, 2015). Yet, Christian marriage uniquely manifests unity within diversity, communion within alterity, and a dynamic of mutual covenantal fidelity that analogically mirrors the relational ontology of the Triune God.

Without conflating the creaturely marital bond with the uncreated divine essence, it becomes dogmatically viable to conceptualize marriage as a relational sign of trinitarian fellowship—an existential space where divine grace becomes visible within the socio-historical fabric of human life (Kärkkäinen, 2019). Such an approach successfully bridges the gap between theology and sociology, offering a comprehensive, relational, and ontological expansion of Christian sacramentality that remains respectful of Reformation insights while overcoming its rigid formalist constraints (Pannenberg, 2021).

d. Marriage as a symbolic mediation of grace

The hermeneutical contribution of Paul Ricoeur

To transcend the rigid juridical-historical barriers of classical Protestant sacramentology, contemporary theology benefits significantly from the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. In *La symbolique du mal* and *Le conflit des interprétations*, Ricoeur posits that a symbol possesses an inherent surplus of meaning (*excédent de sens*) that consistently evades any purely literal, historicist, or reductionist reading (Ricoeur, 2022). According to his foundational axiom, "the symbol gives rise to thought" (*le symbole donne à penser*); it functions as a semantic and ontological catalyst that opens up an existential horizon, capable of mediating transcendent realities within the immanent realm.

From a socio-theological perspective, applying Ricoeurian hermeneutics to kinship allows researchers to re-evaluate holy matrimony not as a static social contract or a mere legal arrangement, but as a dynamic, living relational symbol (Jensen, 2018). Marriage operates as an existential metaphor that historically and socially mediates the covenantal love of the Triune God to human society, breaking through the functionalist boundaries established by early modern confessions.

Scriptural synthesis and the trinitarian nuptial symbolism

This symbolic density is deeply rooted within the Biblical canon, which deploys marital imagery to articulate the overarching economy of salvation. Scriptural evidence reveals a unified theological trajectory that weaves together creation, redemption, and eschatological consummation. The foundation is laid in Genesis 2:24, which frames the marital union as an ontological communion—where "the two become one flesh"—establishing interpersonal alterity and unity as part of the prelapsarian order of creation. This anthropological reality is given a Christological and ecclesiological orientation in Ephesians 5:31–33, where the physical and spiritual union between husband and wife is explicitly defined as a *mysterion* mirroring the sacrificial covenant between Christ and the Church (Wright, 2018).

This covenantal logic is structurally anchored in the trinitarian self-donation of God. John 3:16 demonstrates the primal, sacrificial outpour of the Father's love toward the cosmos through the gift of the Son, an act historically consummated in John 19:34, where blood and water flow from the pierced side of the crucified Christ as a somatic sign of redemptive life. This dual stream is explicitly tied to a trinitarian framework in 1 John 5:5–9, where the Spirit, the water, and the blood act as concurrent earthly witnesses to the divine reality (Willimon, 2020).

Finally, the entire biblical narrative achieves its eschatological fulfillment in Revelation 21:1–5, which depicts the ultimate realization of the Kingdom of God under the architectural metaphor of the wedding feast of the Lamb (*nuptiae Agni*). Far from being isolated verbal decrees, these scriptural vectors demonstrate that the Bible presents marriage as a comprehensive theological sign. It maps a trajectory of mutual self-giving, covenant, and relationality that begins in the creation accounts, is sustained by the redemptive work of the Son and the witness of the Spirit, and culminates in the eternal perichoretic communion between God and a renewed humanity.

Marriage as a comprehensive theological and anthropological sign

Consequently, within a revised theological framework, marriage emerges as an integrated theological sign that simultaneously makes visible three fundamental realities: the historical covenant between Yahweh and Israel, the mystical union between Christ and the Church, and the eternal perichoretic fellowship of the Triune God. It serves as an

analogia relationis, wherein human historical partnerships manifest the invisible relationality of the Godhead (Barth, 2010).

Simultaneously, this theological framework yields profound sociological and anthropological insights. It reveals the human person not as an atomized, autonomous individual—as modern secularity suggests—but as an integrated, relational being composed of body, soul, and spirit, whose ultimate flourishing is achieved through the structural vulnerability of covenantal love (Hauerwas, 2017).

The Johannine witnesses—the Spirit, the water, and the blood—reframe the domestic space of marriage as an outpost of the ecclesial body. By participating in this symbolic mediation of grace, the relational bond of marriage is continually purified, sanctified, and sustained. It transcends its civil or natural functionality to become a transparent vehicle of divine love, a localized visible icon of the Trinitarian communion enacted within human history (Kärkkäinen, 2019).

e. Proposing a trinitarian sacramentality of marriage

The barthian reconstructive framework and the analogia relationis

The dialectical theology of Karl Barth provides the primary reconstructive architecture for this study. Throughout his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth rigorously recenters the theological enterprise upon the objective, historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Barth, 2010). Within this christocentric ontology, divine grace is not an abstract substance but an event—the historical self-revelation of the Triune God. This self-revelation achieves its supreme, concrete manifestation in the sacrificial self-donation of the crucified Christ on the cross.

Crucially, Barth posits that this vertical covenant of grace establishes an analogia relationis (an analogy of relation) within the horizontal, creaturely realm (Webster et al., 2016). This structural logic of reciprocal self-giving, which constitutes the very heart of the trinitarian life (*opera ad extra*), finds an existential, localized correspondence in Christian marriage. Consequently, the marital covenant can be conceptualized as a symbolic and ethical participation in the trinitarian love revealed in Christ, operating as an immanent space where the covenantal fidelity of God is historically mirrored (Lawler, 2015).

Marriage as participatory icon of trinitarian fellowship

Grounded in this relational analogy, holy matrimony transcends its classical classification as a mere civil or creation-order arrangement, emerging as an active participation in the perichoretic communion of the Triune God. Marriage uniquely manifests a structural unity within interpersonal diversity, an ongoing relational fellowship, and a matrix of mutual grace that analogically mirrors the internal life of the Godhead (Volf, 1998). Within this framework, the Christian couple becomes an immanent image and an historical locus of the divine presence within the human socio-cultural fabric.

It is epistemologically vital to clarify that this perspective does not assert an ontological identity or a pantheistic collapse between the uncreated Trinitarian essence and the creaturely human couple; the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity is strictly maintained (*finitum non capax infiniti*). Rather, marriage functions as a structural and symbolic participation in the divine logis of communion (Volf, 2021). It is a relational icon wherein human alterity and companionship are sanctified to bear witness to the eternal, loving dialogical reality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Zizioulas, 2023).

Doctrinal re-evaluation of the sacramental concept

Accordingly, this study proposes a comprehensive doctrinal re-evaluation of the sacramental concept within contemporary Protestant dogmatics. To limit sacramentality exclusively to strict historical-judicial criteria or literal textual mandates from the historical Jesus represents a form of theological reductionism that fails to capture the

dynamic, pneumatic scope of the economy of salvation. A sacrament should be re-envisioned not merely as a pedagogical signifier or an institutionalized ritual, but as an ontological and relational mediation of divine grace operating within the historical narrative of salvation.

By expanding the sacramental horizon to encompass those enduring human structures of covenant and communion that organically mirror the Triune God, contemporary theology can re-sacralize the domestic sphere without undermining the core commitments of the Reformation (Jensen, 2018). This relational broadening does not betray the principles of *sola Scriptura* or *sola fide*; instead, it fulfills them by recognizing that the Word of God continually actualizes its redemptive, covenantal power through the embodied, relational structures of human kinship (Kärkkäinen, 2019).

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the classical Protestant reduction of the sacraments to merely two ecclesial realities does not constitute an immutable or unreformable dogmatic datum. Methodologically, this historical limitation must be understood within its specific sixteenth-century polemical and socio-theological matrix, characterized by the Reformers' urgent pastoral and political endeavor to purge Christian doctrine of the mechanical ritualism and sacerdotal monopolies inherent to the late medieval scholastic system (Burnet et al., 2021).

However, in the contemporary theological landscape, this binary reduction proves insufficient for articulating the profound relational, perichoretic, and trinitarian depths of Christian revelation. When evaluated through a modern lens, the classical framework inadvertently promotes a form of text-based legalism that detaches the structural means of grace from the dynamic, ongoing life of the Christian community (Torrance, 2021).

To transcend the limitations of an exclusively historicist or confessionalist reading, this study introduces a critical inter-epistemological framework. This inter-epistemological approach is not a mere eclectic synthesis; rather, it establishes a rigorous dialogue between distinct regimes of theological and philosophical rationality to enable both dogmatic deconstruction and constructive theological renewal (Kärkkäinen, 2019).

First, Karl Popper's critical rationality is mobilized as an analytical tool for doctrinal deconstruction, challenging the pseudo-scientific or absolutist claims of historical dogmas by demonstrating that theological formulations are historically situated human constructs open to critical falsification and reassessment (Popper, 2002).

Second, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics facilitates a semantic reopening of theological language. By showing that the religious symbol always possesses a surplus of meaning (*excédent de sens*), Ricoeurian philosophy unties the concept of "sacrament" from rigid, literal definitions, allowing it to encompass the deep relational realities of human kinship (Ricoeur, 2022).

Finally, Karl Barth's dialectical theology serves as the architectural reconstructive principle. By recentering the entire dogmatic locus upon the trinitarian revelation in Jesus Christ, Barth provides the necessary conceptual tools to reframe marriage as an *analogia relationis*—a creaturely space that dynamically participates in and mirrors the eternal, self-giving communion of the Triune God (Barth, 2010 ; Volf, 1998).

Consequently, this inter-epistemological model successfully overcomes the false dichotomy between nature and grace, or contract and sacrament. It offers international scholarship a viable path toward an expanded, trinitarian sacramentality that honors foundational Reformation insights while dynamically adapting to contemporary relational and ecclesial anthropologies (Jensen, 2018).

a. The inter-epistemological matrix and critical synthesis

The tripartite epistemological dialogue

This research is fundamentally anchored within an inter-epistemological framework designed to facilitate a critical dialogue between distinct regimes of theological and philosophical rationality. Protestant theological modernity, historically predicated upon the normative axioms of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*, established a robust, word-centered framework intended to protect the sovereignty of divine revelation from institutional corruption (Muller, 2020). However, when left isolated, this classical epistemic model frequently degenerates into a rigid dogmatic scholasticism that limits hermeneutical openness and overlooks the ongoing relational dynamics of the ecclesial body.

To counteract this speculative immobility, late modern and postmodern epistemologies introduce a necessary critical leverage and interpretive plurality. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics highlights the semantic autonomy of the text and the productive polysemy of religious language, demonstrating that dogmatic formulations possess a surplus of meaning that cannot be frozen in historical configurations (Ricoeur, 2022). Concurrently, Karl Popper's critical rationality provides an analytical tool against dogmatic absolutism, using the principle of falsifiability to demonstrate that human theological systems are historically situated and continuously subject to critical revision and intellectual testing (Popper, 2002).

Nevertheless, a purely postmodern openness carries the epistemological hazard of hyper-relativism or semantic fragmentation. Consequently, the dialectical theology of Karl Barth is mobilized as a vital methodological regulative. By rigorously anchoring all theological reflection within the objective, historic reality of the christological and trinitarian revelation, Barth prevents the hermeneutical inquiry from dissolving into subjective speculation (Barth, 2010 ; Webster et al., 2016). This study demonstrates that none of these epistemological systems can suffice in isolation; their critical, mutual friction provides the precise methodological conditions required to articulate a systematic theology responsive to contemporary relational realities.

Toward a renewed protestant sacramentality

When a sacrament is understood fundamentally as an immanent, visible manifestation of the transcendent, invisible presence of God, it becomes clear that various ecclesial and creaturely realities possess an inherent sacramental capacity. The restrictive historical-judicial definitions inherited from the early Reformation—while contextually understandable as boundary-marking mechanisms—are systematically inadequate for expressing the perichoretic and trinitarian depths of Christian revelation (Zizioulas, 2023).

Accordingly, this research does not seek to dismantle the Reformed tradition, but to enrich its core commitments through a constructive expansion of the economy of grace. Holy matrimony can thus be re-envisioned as an intentional, relational space wherein the communion of the Triune God is historically actualized and socially witnessed, functioning as a dynamic symbolic mediation of the divine presence (Jensen, 2018).

In this reconstructive task, Karl Barth's dialectical architecture plays an indispensable role. By centering the dogmatic locus upon the trinitarian self-revelation accomplished in Jesus Christ—specifically manifested in the event of the cross—Barth enables theology to conceptualize marriage as a genuine *analogia relationis* (analogy of relation) (Barth, 2010). The sacrificial self-donation of Christ on the cross serves as the ultimate relational archetype for Christian kinship.

Far from being a mere civil arrangement or secular contract, the marital covenant represents a localized, counter-cultural communal practice. Through its structural features of mutual vulnerability, alterity, and stable fidelity, the conjugal communion operates as a

transparent visible icon that analogue-records the eternal perichoretic fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within human history (Volf, 1998 ; Coakley, 2013 ; Hauerwas, 2017).

IV. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the classical Protestant exclusion of holy matrimony from the formal sacramental domain does not constitute an immutable or definitive dogmatic datum. The historical restriction of the sacraments to Baptism and the Holy Supper was largely predicated upon contingent historical-theological configurations forged within the highly polemical and sociopolitical matrix of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Although this structural reduction played a vital role in dismantling late medieval sacerdotal monopolies and redefining the Protestant theology of unmerited grace, it proves systematically inadequate in the contemporary landscape for expressing the profound relational, perichoretic, and trinitarian depths of Christian revelation.

Through a rigorous inter-epistemological framework that critically coordinates Karl Popper's critical rationality, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and Karl Barth's dialectical theology, this research has articulated a constructive doctrinal re-evaluation of marriage as a trinitarian mediation of divine grace. Far from a mere secular arrangement or civil contract, marriage emerges as an integrated relational sign of the Triune God's fellowship with humanity and as an immanent, symbolic participation in the sacrificial covenant between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the primary hypothesis of this study is fully validated: holy matrimony can be conceptualized as a sacramental reality without betraying or undermining the core soteriological commitments of Reformed Protestant theology. This relational expansion successfully preserves the foundational insights of the Reformers while freeing the dogmatic framework from a rigid textual positivism.

Ultimately, this study offers international scholarship a viable path forward for contemporary Protestant dogmatics, rendering it capable of engaging dynamically with current ecclesiological, hermeneutical, and anthropological challenges. By redefining sacramentality through an ontological and relational lens rather than a strictly juridical one, this research invites further systematic inquiry into how the domestic sphere can be structurally recognized as an outpost of the ecclesial body. It opens up new horizons for ecumenical dialogue and systematic theology, challenging contemporary Protestantism to re-envision its sacramental economy in light of the eternal, self-giving communion of the Triune God.

References

- Augustin, S., Dombart, B., Kalb, A., Bardy, G., Combès, G., & Revel-Barreteau, C. (2014). *La cité de Dieu* (Réimpression de l'éd. de 1959). Institut d'études augustiniennes.
- Barth, K. (1953). *Die kirchliche Dogmatik: Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes* (Band 1). Evangelischer Verlag.
- Barth, K. (1956a). *Church dogmatics: The doctrine of reconciliation* (Vol. 4, Part 1). T&T Clark.
- Barth, K. (2010). *Church dogmatics: The doctrine of the Word of God* (Vol. 1). Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics: The doctrine of God* (Vol. 2, Part 1). T&T Clark.

- Burnet, R., Nelson, D., & Ward, I. (Eds.). (2021). *The Oxford handbook of early modern theology, 1500–1700*. Oxford University Press.
- Calvin, J. (2012). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (J. T. McNeill, Ed.; F. L. Battles, Trans.). Westminster John Knox Press. (Original work published 1559).
- Calvin, J., Millet, O., & de Bèze, T. (2009). *Institution de la religion chrétienne (1559 text)*. Librairie Droz.
- Christin, O. (2021). *La paix de religion : L'autonomisation politique de la ville moderne (2e éd.)*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Coakley, S. (2013). *God, sexuality, and the self: An essay 'on the Trinity'*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gorski, P. S. (2019). *The disciplinary revolution: Calvinism and the rise of the state in early modern Europe*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hauerwas, S. (2017). *A community of character: Toward a constructive Christian social ethic*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Jensen, A. (2018). *Theology of matrimony: Ecclesiastical and social dimensions of Christian kinship*. Oxford University Press.
- Jenson, R. W. (2001). *Systematic theology: The triune God (Vol. 1)*. Oxford University Press.
- Kärkkäinen, V.-M. (2019). *Christian theology in a pluralistic world: A global introduction*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Lawler, M. G. (2015). *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed questions (2nd ed.)*. Liturgical Press.
- Luther, M. (2016). The Babylonian captivity of the church. In H. J. Hillerbrand, K. Westrem, & D. Price (Eds.), *The annotated Luther: Roots of reform (Vol. 1, pp. 175–234)*. Fortress Press. (Original work published 1520).
- Luther, M., & Kaufmann, T. (2015). *De captivitate babilonica ecclesiae praeludium (Leipzig Ausgabe)*. Klett-Cotta.
- McKim, D. K. (Ed.). (2022). *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*. Cambridge University Press.
- Muller, R. A. (2020). *Post-Reformation reformed dogmatics: The rise and development of reformed orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*. Baker Academic.
- Pannenberg, W. (2021). *Systematic theology (Vol. 3)*. T&T Clark.
- Pickstock, C. (2020). *Aspects of truth: A new religious metaphysics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Popper, K. (1988). *Misère de l'historicisme (H. Rousseau, Trans.)*. Pocket.
- Popper, K. (2002). *The logic of scientific discovery (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Popper, K. (2007). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*. Routledge.
- Ricoeur, P. (1969). *Le conflit des interprétations : Essais d'herméneutique*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Ricoeur, P. (2015). *La symbolique du mal*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Ricoeur, P. (2022). *The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics (D. Ihde, Ed.)*. Northwestern University Press.
- Thomas Aquinas. (2018). *Summa Theologiae (Édition bilingue) (P. Caramello, Ed.)*. Éditions du Cerf.
- Torrance, T. F. (2021). *The Trinitarian faith: The evangelical theology of the ancient Catholic Church (3rd ed.)*. T&T Clark.
- Volf, M. (1998). *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

- Volf, M. (2021). *The home of God: A brief poetics of architecture, ecclesiology, and theology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ward, P., Nelson, D., & Woodward, T. (Eds.). (2022). *The Oxford handbook of contemporary ecclesiology*. Oxford University Press.
- Willimon, W. H. (2020). *The service of God: How worship and liturgy shape Christian living* (2nd ed.). Abingdon Press.
- Wright, N. T. (2018). *Paul and the faithfulness of God: Christian origins and the question of God*. Fortress Press.
- Zizioulas, J. D. (2023). *Being as communion: Studies in personhood and the church*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press.