The Occasional Theology and Constant Spirituality of Rowan Williams

LUKE F. FODOR*

Rowan Williams is not only Archbishop of Canterbury, but also a world-class theologian. This essay explicates Williams’s theology by underscoring the substrate mystagogical impulse that invites his readers into a deeper engagement with the Christian faith. The impulse is explicitly present in his spiritual theology, where he encourages the reader to grow spiritually by dwelling in the place “where Christ stands,” as well as in his academic theology. It is my argument that this mystagogical impulse is manifest in the following characteristics of Williams’s theology: (1) it is embodied or incarnational; (2) it is public and political in nature; (3) it is purgative and progressive.

It has become nearly a cliché, when characterizing Anglican theology, to speak of it as an occasional, contextual, and incarnational venture that is more concerned with prayer than with systematic postulations. Indeed, it is often said that Anglican theology emerges, not from the ivory towers of academia, but from the bell towers of the churchyard where first-order common prayer shapes second-order believing. Clichéd or not, this characterization is clearly borne out in the theological approach of Anglicanism’s premier theologian and current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Not only does this Anglican character imbue his theology at a deep, unspoken level, Williams himself explicitly acknowledges his distinctively Anglican approach in the opening words of the prologue

* Luke F. Fodor is the Assistant Rector at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. He holds master’s degrees from the University of Durham and New York University, a Master of Divinity from Bexley Hall Seminary, and has completed coursework toward a S.T.M in Christian spirituality from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. This is the winning essay of the 2011 Charles Hefling Student Essay Competition.
to *On Christian Theology*, where he broaches the question of his methodology. He writes,

> I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relationship to God. The meanings of the word “God” are to be discovered by watching what this community does—not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating or “inducting,” imagining and worshipping.¹

As these words manifest, Williams's methodology is an adherence to the maxim *lex orandi lex credendi*, with a deep groundedness in communal doxological and spiritual practices. It is perhaps his own spiritual and praxiological sensibility that makes Williams's theology unique and yet part of a long tradition in Anglican theology.

In this paper, which is itself an occasional treatment, I suggest that Rowan Williams's theology is not primarily an academic or scholastic discourse, but rather a contemporary reworking of the ancient tradition of mystagogy, that pedagogical practice which invited disciples to *participate* in the mystery of the faith and not merely articulate it. This participation invites the reader into a relationship and conversation with those saints who have passed on to glory and also obliges the reader to adhere to the discipline of that tradition; thus, one could also speak of discipleship. This suggestion is certainly not an earth-shaking statement. Indeed, even those who are only cursorily familiar with Williams's *oeuvre* will see in his devotional books and manuals, such as *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, or *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, an invitation into a deeper engagement with the Christian faith.

The argument I am making here is that not only does a mystagogical impulse underlie all of Williams's theology, but his theology is a direct outworking of his own spirituality. Throughout his theological writings, Williams is indeed taking occasions as they present themselves to wrestle theologically with thorny issues that face the (post)modern church and individuals as they seek to follow

---

Rowan Williams’s Theology and Spirituality  265

after the Risen One. However, that is not all he is doing. Williams uses
these occasions to demonstrate and employ his own spirituality, and
like the Apostle Paul, he seems to say, “Be imitators of me, as I am of
Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). In this paper, I will trace his spirituality through
his writings on spiritual theology, principally in The Wound of
Knowledge, to his “critical theology” in On Christian Theology and
Wrestling with Angels.2 But before we begin this journey, we must
first consider the definition and characteristics of spirituality.

The Study of Spirituality and/or Spiritual Theology

In any study of Christian spirituality there are various approaches
and starting points, just as there different definitions. The concept of
spirituality has developed into both a meaningful site for research and
an interpretative strategy for accessing comprehensive modalities of
belief/practice that are embodied within the lived practice of individ-
uals, communities, and their discourses.3 Given Williams’s constant
concern with worshipping communities, there seems to be a natural
connection here, but spirituality must be approached carefully so as
to resist essentializing it into some sort of perennial philosophy. Wil-
liams himself is quite suspicious of the term “spirituality,” suggesting
that we need to maintain “a certain level of ‘dymythologizing,’” given
that the word ‘spiritual’ has lately become strangely fashionable.”4

One prominent scholar in the study of spirituality, Sandra Schnei-
ders, defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement
in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward
the ultimate value one perceives.”5 But this definition wanders dan-
gerously close to the “mythological” character that Williams identifies.
Mark McIntosh isolates a similar concern in his study on the ultimate
cohesion of theology and spirituality, Mystical Theology. His primary

2 The designation of “critical theology” is a self-designation and part of a tripartite
taxonomy that Williams delineates in the prologue to On Christian Theology, xii–xvi.
3 A similar approach is also embodied in ritual studies and the process of “ritual-
ization.” See Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford Uni-
4 Rowan Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands,” in An Introduction to Chris-
and Dynamics of a Discipline,” in Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spiritu-
ality, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 2005), 7.
contention with Schneiders’s approach is that she encourages the “distinction, at least theoretically, between spirituality as an inherent feature of human existence and the particular process by which the possibility moves towards fulfillment.”6 This theoretical distinction risks a simultaneous evacuation and reification of meaning, but more importantly for McIntosh, this anthropological approach perpetuates “the divorce between spirituality and theology” and “renders God peripheral.”7

While McIntosh is correct in expressing grave concerns about Schneiders’s potential displacement of God, I do not think that an anthropological approach necessarily dispatches God to the side. The anthropological approach does indeed have an opposing point of instigation—the experience of the human subject. In making the lived experience of the human subject the starting point, Schneiders is not attempting to dispense with God as the object of spirituality, but rather seeks to ameliorate what she sees as the theological tendency to subsume the diversity of human experience into essential notions of the human encounter with God. Even though she commences from the human subject, like McIntosh, she argues that “theology is integral to any research in Christian spirituality.”8

In addition to their differing starting points, I would suggest that McIntosh and Schneiders end up speaking past one another, due to the social locations and politics of their varying ecclesial contexts.9 To clarify and potentially compensate for both unintentional propensities of the theological and anthropological approaches, I think a more specifically defined notion of Christian spirituality is called for, one that identifies its ultimate value in the direct experience of the Trinitarian God. Lisa Dahill reforms Schneiders’s definition in specifically Christian terms thusly: “Christian spirituality is the world-encompassing and life-transforming action of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ in the life of a person or community and her/his/their experience of and response

---

7 McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 21.
9 McIntosh is an Episcopal priest and Schneiders is a Roman Catholic nun.
to that action of God.”10 In this essay, “spirituality” will only refer to this specifically Christian definition.

Because the concept of “spirituality” is so pervasive, diaphanous, and indeed contested, the study of Christian spirituality is necessarily an interdisciplinary affair, requiring multiple loci and apparatus to get at the lived experience of spirituality. One cannot properly arrest the process of spiritual production to vivisect the spiritual practitioner in hopes of gaining access to the interiority of her experience or consciousness. Spirituality is a lived and practiced expression that requires one to adopt an active means of getting at the subject. To this extent, it is clear that the concept of spirituality is a scholarly apparatus that cuts both ways. As we seek to understand the subject—the lived and conscious project of life integration—our own process of life integration is also implicated in the project. We cannot begin to ascertain the interiority of the subject under investigation if we ourselves are not open to the interiority of our own spirituality. Utilizing this methodology allows us to study Williams and his spiritual theology while respecting that mystagogical impulse inherent in his writings.

So in studying Rowan Williams’s spirituality through a reflection of my own interiority I am opening myself—an Episcopal priest-in-training being formed in Anglican theology and polity—as a window through which we see into Williams’s life in the faith. I will seek to imitate the spiritual path of Rowan Williams as he encounters the divine revelation of the living and triune God made manifest in Jesus Christ, and I invite others to join me in this itinerarium, venturing forth from their armchairs and adopting an attitude of prayer. For if Mike Higton, a leading interpreter of Williams’s theology, is to be trusted, it would seem that there is no other path since in Williams’s “constant mixing of theology, spirituality and politics” he refuses to acknowledge sharp boundaries between these areas of conversation—constantly showing, in fact, that there are deep and telling connections between them. Another way of putting this is to say that you are seldom safe when reading Williams’ works. . . . Williams’ work is constantly crossing boundaries, in the confidence that the Gospel has crossed them before him.11

It is precisely this gospel, which equally challenges and graces this world, that stands as a public standard for the inner working of the Spirit in the lives of the faithful and unfaithful alike.

Rowan Williams’s Spiritual Theology

As Higton has already indicated, since Williams refuses to establish boundaries, it is difficult to isolate Williams’s “spiritual theology” in any one book or essay. He tends to alternate between three distinct modes in his theological writing, modes that he calls “celebratory, communicative and critical styles.” Celebratory theology is the first-order language of prayer, sermons, hymns, and theology that seeks to inspire the reader to encounter God. Communicative theology seeks to reveal more of the gospel and the human encounter with the divine by forging new metaphors and images in conversation with other environments of expression (psychoanalysis, gender studies, and so on). Critical theology can either seek to radically revise the tradition (along agonistic or nihilistic lines) or it can serve to destabilize ossified and hierarchical ways of thinking and affirm the “essential restlessness” at the eschatological heart of the gospel. Williams’s theology tends toward celebratory and critical modes, but it is also communicative in nature.

As one might expect, his spiritual theology is generally exhibited in celebratory mode, but it is present at all levels of his theology. In tracing the form of Williams’s spiritual theology the definitive locus is The Wound of Knowledge, his volume on Christian spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross. But before engaging his interpretation of the grand tradition, I believe it is necessary to frame that study through a later essay, “To Stand Where Christ Stands.”

In reflecting on what life in the Spirit means in the Christian tradition, Williams suggests that the “spiritual enterprise . . . is inseparable from the task of occupying a certain sort of place, grasping in a certain way where and who you are.” This place, as one might imagine, is tied to the historical story and identity of particular people who have continuously united around Jesus. So for Williams, spirituality is above all embodied in our standing in the place where Christ stands: “We stand where Jesus stands as Christian believers and pray as Jesus

12 Williams, On Christian Theology, xiii.
Rowan Williams’s Theology and Spirituality  

prays; and in standing in that place before God as ‘Abba,’ we share equally in Jesus’ directedness towards the good and the healing of the world.”13 Occupying this place means that we live into the fullness of Christ’s and our own humanity and follow his example, living a life marked for others. Living in the midst of this place means eradicating all boundaries that divide us and divesting ourselves of desirous competition or mimetic rivalry.14 Occupying this space, however, is not merely a work of human volition or agency; nor is it an individualistic and moralist project seeking to recreate Christ’s perfect example. The ability to occupy Christ’s place is the work of the Spirit “drawing out of us what we did not know we desired” and directing our desire toward God: “Life in the Spirit is life that is decisively free from the obsessions of self-justification, since the place of Jesus is the place of the one whom the Father has eternally said Yes to; there is no need to negotiate for space of argue for favour and privilege, as it is always already given to and through Jesus.”15

For Williams, spirituality is inextricably tied to the body of Christ—both the historical life of the person Jesus and the living church which constitutes his body.16 For him, spirituality or spiritual theology is essentially “about what it is for a whole human life to be living in the ‘place’ defined by Jesus.”17 Employing the spatial concept—the place defined by Christ—makes it easier to discern the movements of Williams’s spiritual theology.

In elucidating what he means by “standing in the place of Christ,” Williams makes constant reference to other spiritual thinkers and contemplatives in the Christian tradition. Both in this fragmentary essay and in the larger survey, The Wound of Knowledge, as well as in his Teresa of Avila, Williams’s spiritual theology emerges in conversation with the Cappadocians, Saint Augustine, the scholastics, and the reformers, among many others. Rupert Shortt underscores this same

13 Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands,” 2.
15 Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands,” 2–3.
16 It is vitally important to Williams that these two manifestations of Christ’s body be kept distinct so that the church does not usurp the agency of Jesus—who bodily ascended. See “Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in On Christian Theology, 183–196.
17 Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands,” 3.
point in his biography of Williams when he writes, “The Desert Fathers, Meister Eckhart, St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross speak not only to him, but for him.” Indeed, we gain insight into both Williams’s spiritual theology and his own spirituality by following these conversations. At times it is difficult to discern whose theology is being explicated. Are we reading about Bernard of Clairvaux’s theology or Williams’s? Luther’s or Williams’s? The answer, of course, is yes.

By attending to the motif of the locus of Christ, I propose, we are able to tease out three characterizations of Williams’s spiritual theology: (1) it is embodied or incarnational; (2) it is public and political in nature; (3) it is purgative and progressive. As we might expect, these three characterizations are interconnected and flow from the same fountainhead—the life of Christ Jesus. Despite their interconnectedness I shall treat them separately in seriatim.

(1) Theology that is embodied or incarnational

The very title of his book *The Wound of Knowledge* expresses Williams’s understanding of spirituality as an embodied and incarnational practice. The title underscores the woundedness that is manifest in Christ’s body and secondarily in those who follow after him and seek to know Christ, “sharing of his suffering by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10). Accordingly, Williams avers that the call to Christian discipleship is unique in its “readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the center of faith.” As Christians, each of us is called to risk all of our incarnate selves. As such, spiritual theology must pay attention to the body of knowledge lived out through the countless saints who have gone on before, generation after generation, all the way back to first-century Palestine. And yet, Christian spirituality does not “rest on past achievement of vision, understanding, or knowledge” but is necessarily “oriented to the future . . . a ‘future’ that has appeared already.” The past “future” that we are called to is, of course, instantiated and only made possible “by the initiative of God in living out the *typos* of human life—offering himself as a perfected gift and symbol of fleshly life.”

As indicated, this spiritual knowledge of God is only attainable through the biography of Jesus and discernable through our own history and biography. In conversation with Paul, Ignatius, and Irenaeus, Williams affirms that each “in their diverse ways, opens the path to the sense of ‘Christian biography,’ the theological evaluation of how the work of God has united with human variety and contingency in particular lives.” In a sense, what Williams is suggesting is that spiritual knowledge and understanding come from placing our own personal particular “biography” in the place of Christ’s particular “biography.” Thus, understanding is nothing other than a standing under the figure of Christ.

Spiritual theology avows that true knowledge is never merely intellectual or noetic but blended with the passions and the body. Citing the Alexandrian tradition embodied by Clement and Origen, Williams underscores the eternal quality of Jesus’ personhood as the divine Logos. As the incarnate Word, Jesus became a physical statement of the divine word of love. The Spirit constantly beckons us to join in this divine word of love and to live “a life that simply reflects back to God with love God’s own supremely active and unified nature in a harmony of love.” Another way of speaking of this is through the doctrine of theosis—Jesus became human to enlarge humanity wide enough that God might enter, while simultaneously expanding humanity and allowing it to enter into the divine perichoresis of the Triune God. Quoting Origen, Williams locates the start of this divinization in “the inner wound of love.” This “wound of love” is a spark that sets our souls alight and desiring after God. Through Augustine’s spiritual autobiography, Confessions, Williams shows how this desire for God alone is able to provide and vouchsafe any meaningful knowledge for humanity. He writes, “The confidence of the believer never rests upon his intellectual grasp or his intellectual control of his experience, but on the fidelity of the heart’s longing to what has been revealed as the only satisfying object of its desire.” It is only through life in the Spirit that individuals find their knowledge and rest in God.

21 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 41.
24 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 84.
Biography is not only a means of coming to embodied knowledge of God, it is also a means of making spirituality public and political. Against modern conceptualizations of spirituality as essentially a subjective, quietistic, and apolitical practice, Williams argues that spirituality is intrinsically political and public. If spirituality is to occupy the place where Christ stands, it is necessarily political, for Williams concludes, “where Christ is, must be where authority is to be found.”25 The life and death of Christ bear witness to the political nature of his teaching and ministry. Crucified as a political dissident, Jesus’ life becomes a model through which Christians bear witness with their own lives to his authority.26 Martyrdom is then emblematic of the place of Christ, as it publicly conveys his judgment upon the status quo of human power relations where the first are first and the last are last. However, citing the case of Ignatius and his own ecclesiological agenda to establish the threefold order of ministry, Williams admits that this act can itself be co-opted as part of a political strategy. Nonetheless, this too is part of embodied faith that is lived out publicly in the midst of human sinfulness and contingency, but “a task perfected in grace.”27 Because spirituality is public, it is always open to attestation and examination. It serves to offer God’s judgment on the world and to be judged by the world. In other words, although authority resides where Christ is and although we strive to be in the place where Christ is, humanity is essentially “where he [Christ] is not.”28 The hope and struggle of life in the Spirit is paradoxical, for as Williams concludes, “that place where he is not is also the place where he is bound to be as the lover or spouse of the created self.”29 Like a loving life-partner, Christ constantly surprises us and challenges us to grow into our full stature, purging the lesser parts of ourselves.

As the third-century persecution by the state waned, Christians found other ways to perform spiritual acts of revolt, but none more significant than the flourishing of monasticism. Sacrificially withdrawing

27 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 30.
from the social order and their families, those who embraced the vowed life of faith established disciplined solitary and communitarian expressions of life in the Spirit. Submitting themselves to a rule of life dedicated to prayer and poverty, these monastics sought to perform the same action enshrined in martyrdom. They denounced the state’s suggestion that it could secure the place of Christ and facilitate his followers to occupy it. Their retreat from society was not retreat at all, but rather an attempt to “destroy the illusions” of self-sufficiency apart from God. As such, like Jesus led into the wilderness, they could not embark on their spiritual quest apart from the prompting of the Spirit.

(3) Theology that is purgative and progressive

As the example of monasticism presents, Christians are called to political action through the renunciation of the world and its system of valuation. To occupy the place where Christ stands, the Christian initiates a life that is attuned to a progressive process of purgation that endeavors to bear the mark of Christ. According to Williams, life in the Spirit takes as its end goal the knowledge of God “in conformity to God,” which is enacted by sharing God’s own experience through “the exercise of crucifying compassion.” This can be portrayed as the process of kenotic divestment of the self. Williams writes, “The ‘unselﬁng’ involved in union with Christ’s death is made real in the public and social world; the displacing of the ego becomes a giving ‘place’ to others, as God has given ‘place’ to all in his Son.” This process of “unselﬁng” is active purgation not only of “fleshly” comforts and conceits, but also of the temptation for willful, prideful control. Purgation plays an operative role: “growth cannot occur without the stripping of illusion.”

It is important to realize that this purgation does not simply clear the ground so that growth can occur, but rather it is a vehicle for spiritual growth itself. As Williams affirms, “Knowledge of God is found only through the practice of self-crucifying service, in imitation of Christ.” The spiritual quest for God is not satiated by some static understanding of God, but only through the continual participating in “what God does.”

30 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 105.
31 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 23.
32 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 23.
33 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 108.
Throughout *The Wound of Knowledge* and its historical study of “classical spirituality,” Williams brings to the table many saintly conversation partners, each of whom embodies what it means to live in the life of the Spirit and occupy the place the Christ occupies. Ultimately, Williams decides to conclude his survey with Saint John of the Cross, not because he is the last worthy conversation partner, but because his contribution to spiritual theology resists closure and presents the wounded knowledge of God that Williams has been advocating. In Saint John, the seeker finds himself contorted and conformed the more he knows God. As Williams describes this process, “knowledge unifies; knowledge is participation, in which the knower is molded to take the form of what is known.” Accordingly, knowing spiritually is itself purgation—a movement comprised by “stripping and simplification.” For Williams, this stripping, unselfing, or self-forgetting is itself a participation in the divine act of a kenotic God, who is forever withdrawing in the divine self-giving. Purgation is a mirroring of God’s own purgation: “The nature of our participation in the life of God is a participation in God’s self-forgetting bliss.”

Indicating why he closes the book with John of the Cross, Williams underscores John’s significant and poignant awareness “of the way in which spirituality can be made an escape from Christ.” When spirituality becomes a codified expression or experience it is ossified into a veil that hides the presence of Christ. The quest of God requires constant purgation—a continual dark night of the soul. Life in the Spirit does not have, properly speaking, an end—the end is always “not yet” and the painful and “frustrated longing for homecoming, the journey’s end is, unavoidable.” And yet, it is through this “frustrated” longing that we are perfected and formed in God’s self-giving nature. As Williams suggests, “in the middle of the fire we are healed and restored—though never taken out of it.”

---


Although he concludes The Wound of Knowledge with Saint John, he could have more fully included Teresa of Avila, who positively refracts this dark night into the language of friendship. Perhaps that is why Williams found it necessary to engage Teresa in a book-length study, in which he encourages us to follow Teresa’s example:

We must, in Teresa’s language, simultaneously learn friendship with God and each other; and that process involves becoming strangers to ourselves or ourselves as we have conceived and constructed ourselves. We must become strangers to the tyrannies of honour and dignity: the ascetic life in a community of equals initiates this process, and teaches us a new solidarity with the dispossessed and powerless.39

Teresa’s reminder of the importance of community is essential. Life in the Spirit is never a private journey, but one lived out in community. Participation in the self-giving of the Triune God is a call to self-giving in community. The purging that Teresa describes happens within the church, for “the church is the place where selfless service is learned, in the daily rub of communal life.”40

As I have presented Williams’s spiritual theology, three principles characterize the Christian’s endeavor to stand in the place where Christ stands: (1) it is embodied or incarnational; (2) it is public and political in nature; (3) it is purgative and progressive. Occupying this place necessitates a public/political outworking of an incarnational and embodied indwelling of the Spirit in the life of the believer that is progressively refined and purged to better reflect the loving example of Jesus Christ. These same three principles characterize his technical and academic theology. I will now present several examples where Williams embraces these spiritual traits in the course of his academic arguments, which are in themselves an outworking of his own spirituality and love for God.

_Systematically Spiritual_

Among the nearly twenty essays that comprise On Christian Theology, the topic of the Spirit and spirituality occur frequently, which is not particularly surprising, as any doctrinal account of theology ought

---

to reflect on the third member of the Trinity and its activity in the life of the church. Given that, as Williams himself indicates, systematic theology is “properly inseparable” from spirituality, the reader should expect his pneumatological proclivities.41 What is particularly illuminating in Williams’s academic essays is the manner in which he opens room for the Spirit and even encourages the reader to join him in what he would call “celebratory theology.” He “solves” complex theological problems by reminding us that theology is a spiritual practice. As I have suggested, this movement is part of Williams’s own spirituality and part of his substrate mystagogical project. In what follows, I will underscore these movements by citing instances where Williams employs those three manifestations of his spiritual theology.

In perhaps a paradigmatically self-effacing movement, Williams is careful not to overplay the themes of incarnation or embodiment in this theology, even though they are at its core. He is careful because “Anglican theology, with its long-standing enthusiasm about the incarnational principle, has often risked [using] . . . the image of incarnation, the fusion of heaven and earth, the spiritualizing of matter . . . [as a] wonderfully resourceful tool for making sense of a sacramental community with a social conscience and a cultural homeland.”42 This ideological employment of the incarnational theme threatens to obscure the true message of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, which, for Williams, is the paschal mystery. It is the mystery of a God who is willing to risk ultimate vulnerability that secures meaning for our own embodied nature, or as Williams frames it, Jesus is the “meaning of meaning”: “He is vulnerable, says the story, in spirit and flesh to the ways in which human beings like you and me betray and kill each other in spirit and flesh.”43

For Williams, the embodiment of our faith and spirituality is the embodiment of Jesus. Who we are as a species is tied up in who Jesus is as a person. This understanding is communicated through the sacraments and rooted in Christ’s own embodiment: “Jesus, baptized, tempted, forgiving and healing, offering himself as the means of a new covenant, is himself ‘sacrament.’” Williams uses this understanding to redirect “weary controversies” in sacramental theology, suggesting that it does not matter “what God does” or “what we do”

---

41 Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 189.
43 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 93, 90.
in sacramental actions. He reminds us that the sacraments are performed in obedience to Jesus Christ, “by those already caught up in God’s work,” actively opening themselves up to receive.44

In this meditation on the sacramental nature of Christ’s incarnation and our own embodiment in relationship to it, Williams is able to underscore the sacramental nature of creation. Williams’s spiritual sensibilities are able to take complex theological concerns and remind us that ultimately the “Spirit is active where broken flesh and shed blood become the sign and promise of human wholeness and union with the Father.”45 As we encounter the sacraments in the church or refracted in creation, we encounter Christ and the mystery of our embodiment. Specifically in the Eucharist, we receive Jesus’ own body broken for us; we receive it and it redeems our own embodied and broken existence. Through the sacraments we stand in the place that Christ stands—in our human frailty exhibiting the divine vulnerability. In being united with Christ, we are united with God and the process of divinization continues.

This embodied existence, Christian life, and activity of the church—as an extension of Jesus’ own life and message—is intrinsically public and political. In Williams’s theology, this dimension is framed around the central metaphor of judgment, which contains many registers and connotations but is chiefly reflective of the human propensity to evaluate concrete and particular situations, discern the good, and conduct transformative action. In other words, judgment is above all a means of conversation—“a complex process of interaction” that leads to conversion and transformation.46 The transformative goal of judgment is the realization that the human community finds its true identity in light of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Judgment is not about condemnation, but rather the acceptance of our creaturely vulnerability and the progressive reevaluation of human notions of power. In accepting judgment—in accepting our vulnerability—we participate in the divine life-giving, self-giving expression of abundant life manifest in Christ Jesus. As Paul wrote, “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). Ultimately, Williams suggests that the Christian message requires an expression of openness:

44 Williams, On Christian Theology, 204–205.
45 Williams, On Christian Theology, 124.
46 Williams, On Christian Theology, 32.
“Good doctrine teaches silence, watchfulness and the expectation of the Spirit’s drastic appearance in judgment, recognition, conversion, for us and for the whole world.”

Being open to the judgment of the “world” is one way in which those who find their ultimate meaning in Jesus begin the process of purgation. Williams is also keenly attuned to the means through which theology, like any human discourse, is prone to ideological co-optation and political maneuvering. In his view the role of the theologian is twofold: (1) to be judged by the gospel and the tradition that emerges from it, and (2) to judge the tradition. Therefore the theological enterprise requires a posture of openness—openness to criticism of the gospel, the self, and the other. Williams uses the practice of contemplation to illustrate this posture: “Contemplation . . . is a deeper appropriation of the vulnerability of the self in the midst of the language and transactions of the world; it identifies the real damaging pathologies of human life, our violent obsessions with privilege, control and achievement, as arising from the refusal to know and love oneself as a creature, a body.” Such openness in systematic theology is quite distinct. Geoffrey Wainwright lauds Williams for his innovative approach to systematic theology, calling him an advocate of an “open system,” suggesting that Williams is “happier with narrative than with system.” While this is one way of characterizing his theology, if decidedly intellectual in orientation, I believe that it is better to speak of Williams’s resistance to closure as a manifestation of his spiritual and theological support of purgation.

As we have already indicated, the study of spirituality through Williams’s theology requires our self-implication in the task. So the ideological purgation of the theological enterprise is also a personal purgation. Williams affirms the role that purgation plays in freeing us to encounter God: “There is indeed a sense in which we meet God in emptiness and silence, in the void of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, in the darkening of sense and spirit in prayer.” Yet he holds this sentiment in tension with our embodied encounter with the divine: “But we should not allow the weighty and important language of ‘God at work in nothingness’ to deceive us into thinking that Good Friday is

not history or that the soul in the night of contemplation ceases to be bound up in its material creaturehood.”\textsuperscript{50} And in this tension—or perhaps juxtaposition—we have a picture of Williams’s spiritual theology lived out, never ceasing to be critical of human motivation for self-deception, and yet rejoicing in God’s self-forgetting and self-effacing work in redeeming incarnate and creaturely existence by becoming vulnerable with it.

And with that, we witness the dance of Williams’s mystagogy: from embodiment to judgment to purgation. Like the dance of the Trinity, Williams’s spiritual theology beckons us to join the dance to purge ourselves of our own self-interests, to embrace our own vulnerable creatureliness, and to open ourselves to the judgment of the gospel. At the Spirit’s behest, this continual movement finds us occupying the place where Christ resides.

Conclusion

In my engagement with the theology of Rowan Williams, I have been making one overarching point: in the various topics and differing styles of his theology, Williams is forever inviting and enticing the reader to stand more fully in the place where Christ stands. As he himself engages in conversation with the saints living and those who have gone on before, Williams invites us to converse—to enter the conversation not only at an intellectual level, but with our lives. In his preface to \textit{Love’s Redeeming Work}, the magnificent genealogy of Anglican theology and discourse Williams edited with Geoffrey Rowell and Kenneth Stevenson, Williams writes: “The hope of the editors is that this book will be not only a tool for study but what earlier Christian generations called an \textit{encheiridion}—a handbook for faithful living, a resource for wisdom in leading an intelligent, humble, and grateful life of discipleship.”\textsuperscript{51} I would suggest that we let this statement speak for all of Williams’s theology. May we, following the example of Rowan Williams and all of God’s saints, find our desire for God kindled and be moved to seek “the knowledge of God through the practice of self-crucifying service, in imitation of Christ.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, 207.
\textsuperscript{52} Williams, \textit{The Wound of Knowledge}, 62.