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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Charles Williams: Priest of the Co-inherence

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"I'm a little conscious myself of a certain new detachment. What you might call my 'field of operations' has widened, but it's more markedly remote. I mean that I'm even more of a . . . prophet? priest? Something—more of a Voice and less of a man . . ."
(Letter to his wife dated 17 Feb/45, three months before his death)

Thank you all for joining me in this second session on Charles Williams. The first session presented Charles Williams as a "prophet of glory," outlining the biographical highlights of his life, the impact of his charismatic personality on his friends, and his spiritual ideals. Although my earlier paper defined his doctrine of the Co-Inherence, explaining briefly that this doctrine entails "romantic theology" with its emphasis on substitution and exchange, this paper will seek to illustrate more deeply what Williams actually meant by these as a real Way of life, to be lived out concretely in a conscious awareness of Love-in-God.

At the close of my last presentation, I mentioned that during the 1920's and early 1930's CW wrote three short plays for his colleagues to act in at Amen House where he worked at the Oxford University Press. A colleague of CW's, Gerry Hopkins, later wrote that for Williams, "the City of God in which he never ceased to dwell, contained Amen House as its noblest human monument, and all who lived and worked within it were citizens with him."¹ Well, that extension of Williams's personal mythic universe to encompass his colleagues at work grew even deeper in 1939. You of course remember that 1939 was the year that CW came up to Oxford and joined Lewis's literary gathering of friends. His biographer, Alice Mary Hadfield relates that at this time too, "Charles began to agree to his friends' pressure to form an Order concerned with his ideas of co-inherence, substitution and exchange—a step he had refused for three years."² He wrote out a set of

principles by which "The Companions of the Co-Inherence" were to order their lives, and by that September they were "promulgated" among the "Household." His biographer spells these principles out exactly as CW wrote them down initially. Basically, the principles put forth creedal Christianity and emphasize that those "members" who are "in union with" Christ and His Mystical Body must likewise live lives of "substitution" and "exchange." This of necessity involves "bearing each other's burdens," acknowledging that the foundation for this is "the Divine Substitution of Messias," and, finally, associating themselves with four Feasts of the High Anglican Church.³

I find it fascinating that in 1941, in a newspaper review of a book on the origin of the Jesuits, Williams wrote even more knowingly and passionately about such an Order:

. . . let us then keep our Order secret; let it not be organized but by that prudent ambition. It will have as many 'difficult and heroic feats' as Ignatius himself loved; it shall depend on less, as a Company, even than the Jesuits, for they did at least know each other; but we shall not, or only by holy Luck. Its derivation shall be from God through others; its meditation on those indirect derivations; its aim the propaganda everywhere of that sensitive and humble knowledge. It shall not be a social or

religious movement but it shall be at the bottom of all in the sense that it is their true and only justification in mere fact . . . Secret and certain, its only history will be in the conversation of the Companions and in the slow stilling and deepening of their eyes.⁴

Conversations are ephemeral things, yet through the details of CW's known life and his passionate intensity shining in the "web of glory" that constitutes his body of literary work, we too can learn about the "Companions of the Co-Inherence" and perhaps even join with them in the secret citadel of our souls. If we dare, and are blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can even progress through the three levels of this "Company" as Williams describes in his poem, "The Founding of the Company," in his Arthurian cycle of poetry, *The Region of the Summer Stars*. Again, the new Company grows "as a token of love" and lives "only by conceded recollection, having no decision, no vote or admission." So, "at the first station, were those who lived by frankness of honourable exchange, labour in the kingdom, devotion in the Church, the need each had of other." Later in this poem, Williams tells us that "The Company's second mode bore farther the labour and fruition; it exchanged the proper self and wherever need was drew breath daily in another's place, according to the grace of the Spirit 'dying each other's life, living each other's death.' Terrible and lovely is the general substitution of souls. . . . none of the Company—in marriage, in the priesthood, in friendship, in all love—forgot in their own degree the decree of substitution." According to Williams, "Few—and that hardly—entered on the third station, where the full salvation of all souls is seen, and their co-inhering, as when the Trinity first made man in Their image, and now restored by the one adored substitution." Living with this large vision of verse, holding the image of *perichoresis*, "of separateness without separation," "The Company throve by love, by increase of peace, by the shyness of saving and being saved in others—the Christ-taunting and Christ-planting maxim which throughout Logres the excellent absurdity held."⁵ In other words, at this third level are "those few slaves and lords, priests and mechanics, who are aware that the human interchanges are images of the reciprocal love among the Persons of the Trinity."⁶

I venture to guess that most of us here today have not meditated very deeply on how our ordinary, everyday "exchanges," whether in the intimacy of our marriage beds or in the commerce of public exchange of money and other transactions, are images of the reciprocal exchange of love among the Persons of what Anglo-Catholics call the Holy and Undivided Trinity! This mystical vision of Love-in-God IS "the web of the Glory," and Williams consistently pronounced it throughout his entire life as Fact. You will understand what is going on in his seven supernatural novels if you

see his characters according to CW's idea of Co-inherence. For those who affirm the images of experience as part of the web of the Glory, and therefore "good," even though they may experience it as "terrible" at a given point in time, there is ultimately salvation and the joy of exchange and the bearing of burdens. The characters in his novels who deny "the actuality of the universe," have only self and chaos and illusion and ultimately damnation.

I confess that we lack the time to fully investigate the basic methods of "exchanged love" in this presentation. For those interested in pursuing these depths, let me recommend the best book on CW's thought, "The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams" by Mary McDermott Shideler. Shideler unpacks Williams's vision of Co-Inherence, noting that it involves three aspects. First, there is the use of the body as an index of love. Then, there is the development of the feeling intellect and of faith. Finally, there are the primary acts of love, seen in the bearing of burdens, sacrifice, and forgiveness.⁷

This first key to understanding Co-inherence, of seeing the Body as an "index" to love, with the flesh supporting all love, requires a little additional instruction, particularly since this concept is fundamentally "sacramental" and partakes of the Catholic religious imagination rather than the Protestant! In referring to David Tracy's book, "Analogical Imagination," Andrew Greeley notes in his book, "The Catholic Imagination," that "Catholics tend to accentuate the immanence of God, Protestants the transcendence of God."⁸ So, as Greeley continues:

When one says that God is love, meaning like human love only more powerful and passionate, one is using a metaphor. When one goes a step further and says that human love is an analogy for God, one says that there is a reality in God which human love is like and which in some fashion human love participates."⁹

If you are in a Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican church, then you undoubtedly recite one of the Creeds each Sunday, and state that you "believe in the resurrection of the body." God is the ultimate sacramentalist, if you will, creating us as having both bodies and souls. Further, he reveals Himself in the God-Man, Jesus, whose being is the dual nature in a fused Image of both the divine and human. Finally, as if to emphasize the sacramentalist nature of God as He is embodied in Christ Jesus, He teaches His followers to "feed on Him" via the Body and the Blood of the eucharistic Bread and Wine. These are fused images—sacraments—in which the physical elements mystically embody the spiritual reality of the presence of Christ as we "feed on Him in our hearts." As Shideler puts it, "When God took flesh and dwelt among us, . . . He demonstrated to all men

that the physical body—his and ours—is indeed the body of our salvation: not spirit dissociated from matter, not some alien substance, but the full humanity of man.”¹⁰ Williams actually makes a rather theologically profound and even mysterious declaration when he states, “It is in our bodies that the secrets exist.”¹¹

The romantic lover sees in the body of his beloved that “‘the means of grace and the hope of glory’ are in our bodies also, and the name of them is love.”¹² Beatrice’s flesh is “the physical Image of Christ, the physical vehicle of the Holy Ghost,”¹³ as Shideler puts it, “because in its own right, it is holy. It shares the co-inherent nature of very love—which is what it means to be holy.”¹⁴ “Flesh knows what spirit knows, / but spirit knows it knows.”¹⁵

This description of the body that Williams calls “romantic theology” implies the next aspect of the doctrine of Co-inherence, namely, that if “flesh knows what spirit knows,” then the usual dualities of “body/mind” and “passion/intellect” are what Shideler calls “cognate functions, categories of one identity.”¹⁶ This is what Williams, borrowing from the poet Wordsworth, calls “the feeling intellect.” As Shideler puts it so well, “. . . adoration requires a whole person. Neither passion alone nor intellect alone enables the whole person to participate fully in the complexity and delight of the co-inherence. . . . However, the feeling intellect . . . must have enrichment from the experiences of others . . .”¹⁷ So we add another layer to our working definition of Williams’s concept of co-inherence: just as human romantic love leads to physical union, so the feeling intellect requires the balance of mutual and passionate exchange intellectually. As Williams puts it in one of his novels, “The Place of the Lion,” :

. . . No mind was so good that it did not need another mind to counter and equal it, and to save it from conceit, and blindness and bigotry and folly. Only in such a balance could humility be found, humility which was a lucid speed to welcome lucidity whenever and wherever it presented itself.¹⁸

Knowledge, as well as being, depends upon exchange. By submitting one’s personal experiences and ideas to the authority of others, a person is united with others in a web of what Williams calls, “reciprocal derivation” or mutuality. Beyond such intellectual assent to this web of mutual exchange lies not only the feeling intellect but also the life of faith. Shideler tells us that “hard thinking is necessary, and disciplined imagination, and rigorous translation of thought and imagery into action, before the feeling intellect can mature into the life of faith.”¹⁹ Williams is quite adamant on this, as he states in one of his biographies:

“The intellect working in a world in which the Incarnation has happened is not obviously in the same position as the intellect working in a world in which the Incarnation has not happened. But it has to learn to operate on the new premises.”²⁰

For the remainder of this paper, I want to look at the third implication of Co-inherence, that of the actual practices that these “new premises” of Incarnational life involve. Shideler asks her readers whether they “believe in” the Incarnation of Love in Christ. All of us here today probably claim to be people of Christian faith who would respond, “well, of course, we believe in the Incarnation of God in Christ.” Yet we need to be challenged by Williams’s thinking on the actual *practice* of substituted love. How do we learn to practice the exchanges of co-inherent love, “under the Mercy” of Messiah?

Again, there are three types of Christian actions involved in the practice of substituted love. They all involve spiritual choices leading to some sort of sacrifice, and often entail a very deeply mystical transaction, in a sort of concrete compact between two people. The three practices are 1) the bearing of burdens; 2) sacrifice; and 3) forgiveness. I will quickly mention how forgiveness and sacrifice are crucial to the practice of substituted love, according to Williams’s incarnational theology, but then discuss in more detail the first practice, that of the bearing of burdens.

We all of us pray The Lord’s Prayer, in which the mutuality of the principle of forgiveness is spelled out explicitly: “Forgive us our trespasses (sins) as we forgive those who trespass (sin) against us.” Williams states in the Introduction to his treatise “The Forgiveness of Sins”:

. . . If there is God, if there is sin, if there is forgiveness, we must know it in order to live to him. If there are men, and if forgiveness is part of the interchanged life of men, then we must know it in order to live to and among them. Forgiveness, if it is at all a principle of that exchanged life, is certainly the deepest of all; if it is not, then the whole principle of interchange is false. . . .²¹

Early in this treatise Williams reminds us that at His incarnation, He became “Forgiveness in flesh; he lived the life of Forgiveness. This undoubted fact serves as a reminder that Forgiveness is an act and not a set of words. It is a thing to be *done*.”²² Later, he develops the principle that the active and passive modes of forgiveness were not to be separated; that they were identical. “To forgive and to be forgiven were one thing.”²³ As for the Lord’s Prayer, well,

It is that state of things in action which the Lord's Prayer entreats to come into action. The threat implicit in that prayer—in that single clause—is very high; it is the only clause which carries a threat, but there it is clear. No word in English carries a greater possibility of terror than the little word 'as' in that clause; it is the measuring rod of the heavenly City, and the knot of the new union. But also it is the key of hell and the knife that cuts the knot of union.

The condition of forgiving then is to be forgiven; the condition of being forgiven is to forgive. The two conditions are co-existent; they are indeed the very point of coexistence, the root of the new union, the beginning of the recovery of the co-inherence in which all creation had begun.²⁴

Moving backwards, as it were, to the second practice of the life of substituted love, we encounter in rare places in literature the mention of "mystical substitution," whereby a person will actually pray with intentionality to God, actually offering up their very life *as an exchange for* the life of another. Deep in the annals of holy hermits of the Eastern Church are stories of elderly women praying to God to take their lives if only a beloved brother, say, or some other loved one finds salvation for his soul. I am running out of time, so will just mention this "mystical substitution" as a possibility mentioned by Sheldon Vanauken in his book, "A Severe Mercy," which I know many of you have read. It is a beautifully written love story that is true, in which Sheldon's ("Van's") beloved wife, "Davy," contracts a medically mysterious liver disease and dies very young. In the chapter "The Barrier Breached," he writes thus:

And Davy one night, having contemplated holiness, said she was restless and would sleep in the guestroom. But she did not sleep: she prayed. All night, like the saints, she wrestled in prayer. Some say that prayer, even prayer for what God desires, releases power by the operation of a deep spiritual law; and to offer up what one loves may release still more. However that may be, Davy that night offered up her *life*. For me—that my soul might be fulfilled . . . Now, . . . she humbly proposed holy exchange. It was between her and the Incarnate One. I was not to know then.²⁵

I will conclude this presentation by discussing in more detail what Williams meant by the practice of bearing burdens. In *He Came Down From Heaven*, he states the principle; in *Descent Into Hell*, perhaps his most successful novel, he illustrates a variety of ways in

which burdens can be borne, the results of this activity, and the results of refusing to bear others' burdens. Pauline, the central character, fears meeting her doppelganger, an image of her very self, and she knows that when she finally meets it, she will go mad or die. Peter Stanhope, her poet/playwright friend, suggests that she is burdened more by the *fear* of meeting it than the actual encounter. He proposes to release Pauline from her fear by taking it upon himself. He asks her:

" . . . Haven't you heard it said that we ought to bear one another's burdens?"

"But that means—" she began, and stopped. "I know," Stanhope said. "It means listening sympathetically, and thinking unselfishly, and being anxious about, and so on. . . . But I think when Christ or St. Paul, or whoever said *bea* . . . he meant something much more like carrying a parcel instead of someone else. To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of. If you're still carrying yours, I'm not carrying it for you—however sympathetic I may be."²⁶

Pauline gives her fear to Stanhope, and he tells her that when she is alone, she is to remember that he is being afraid instead of her. This is not merely a mental exercise of "mind over matter"; Pauline's fear continues to exist; she recognizes that it continues to be fear and her own fear, only Stanhope has taken it over. In a piece of wonderfully imaginative writing, Williams goes on in great detail to describe Stanhope, an Adept who is far along the way of sanctity in the Co-inherence of God, imagining Pauline in her fear:

. . . Deliberately he opened himself to that fear, laying aside for awhile every thought of why he was doing it, forgetting every principle and law, absorbing only the strangeness and the terror of that separate spiritual identity . . . it was necessary first intensely to receive all her spirit's conflict. . . . The body of his flesh received her alien terror, his mind carried the burden of her world . . .²⁷

The technique, Williams explains (in *He Came Down From Heaven*) needs practice and intelligence, as much intelligence as is needed for any other business contract. Any such agreement has three points: (i) to know the burden; (ii) to give up the burden; (iii) to take up the burden. Williams assures us that it is in the exchange of burdens that they become light. Further, he instructs that "the one who gives has to remember that he has parted with his burden, that it is being carried by another, and that his part is to believe that and be at peace . . . The one who takes has to set himself—mind and emotion and sensation—to the burden, to know it, imagine it, receive it—and sometimes not to be taken

aback by the swiftness of the divine grace and the lightness of the burden.²⁸

Williams has two further words of warning concerning this practice of bearing burdens. First, he says that it is necessary to exercise a proper intelligence about what one contracts to undertake. It is necessary (a) not to take burdens too recklessly; and (b) to consider exactly how far any burden, accepted to the full, is likely to conflict with other duties. Secondly, he warns that it is difficult to carry out this burden in the physical world, saying that “the body is probably the last place where such interchange is possible; it is why Messiah deigned to heal the body ‘that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins.’ No such exchange is possible where any grudge—of pride, greed or jealousy—exists, nor any hate; so far all sins must have been ‘forgiven’ between men. . . .”²⁹

I close by mentioning that Williams really believed that such acts of substitution and burden bearing is independent of time and place. Shideler says that:

. . . These are categories of nature, not restrictions upon the acts of exchange. So in circumstances where the substitution cannot take place at the time when the burden needs to be borne—as in Pauline’s wish to carry her ancestor’s fear—the act can be performed in eternity, the infinite contemporaneity of all things . . . What matters is not sequence or distance, but the living web of acts that makes up the Glory of God. . . .³⁰

Shideler says that we know very little about bearing burdens and still less what could happen. Yet C.S. Lewis has written, with regards to the doctrine of bearing burdens, that “This Williams most seriously maintained, and I have reason to believe that he spoke from experimental knowledge.”³¹ If Lewis believed that Charles Williams was speaking with utter truth, should we not also believe and follow as Companions of the Co-inherence? As Williams told us, “the Glory is always to be observed in others.”³²

Notes

- ¹ Cited in the “Introduction” of *The Masques of Amen House* (Altadena, CA: The Mythopoeic Press, 200).
- ² Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), p. 173.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁴ Charles Williams, “The Society of Jesus,” in *Charles Williams: “The Image of the City” and Other Essays* (London: Oxford UP, 1958), p. 115.
- ⁵ Charles Williams, “The Founding of the Company,” in *The Region of the Summer Stars* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 154-159.

- ⁶ Mary M. Shideler, “Introduction,” to *Taliessin Through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars, and Arthurian Torso* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 10.
- ⁷ Mary M. Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 141.
- ⁸ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 5.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- ¹¹ Charles Williams, “The Forgiveness of Sins,” in *He Came Down From Heaven and The Forgiveness of Sins* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 109.
- ¹² As quoted in Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- ¹³ Charles Williams, “The Redeemed City,” in *Charles Williams: “The Image of the City” and Other Essays, op. cit.*, p. 103.
- ¹⁴ Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.
- ¹⁵ Charles Williams, “The Region of the Summer Stars,” *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁶ Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- ¹⁸ Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 187.
- ¹⁹ Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- ²⁰ Charles Williams, *Flecker of Dean Close*, p. 72, as quoted in Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
- ²¹ Charles Williams, “Introduction,” in *The Forgiveness of Sins, op. cit.*, p. 108.
- ²² Charles Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins, op. cit.*, p. 145.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- ²⁵ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, pb., 1987), pp. 145-6.
- ²⁶ Charles Williams, *Descent Into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 98.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
- ²⁸ Charles Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven, op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ³⁰ Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- ³¹ Cited by Mary M. Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- ³² Charles Williams, “The Redeemed City,” in *Charles Williams: “The Image of the City” and Other Essays, op. cit.*, p. 107.