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## “Flesh knows what Spirit knows”

### *Mystical Substitution in Charles Williams' Vision of Co-Inherence*

**Susan Wendling**

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This paper focuses on the spiritual implications for Williams's "doctrine of substituted love" and his understanding of "the way of exchange." After detailing the principles of the Order formed by Williams in 1939, the three levels of "the household of faith" seen in Williams' poem, "The Founding of the Company," are discussed. The implications of incarnational theology for Williams' "theology of romantic love" and the "Way of Exchange" are seen in the great "fusion" of "flesh knowing what spirit knows" and Williams' belief that "it is in our bodies that the secrets exist." Three types of Christian actions involved in the practice of substituted love are detailed: forgiveness, sacrifice and the bearing of burdens. The paper concludes with an investigation into exactly what Williams meant by the practice of "compact prayer" whereby one person actually undertakes to carry another person's burden of fear, sorrow or even physical pain.

**"Flesh knows what Spirit knows":  
Mystical Substitution in Charles Williams' Vision of Co-Inherence**

Susan Wendling  
Philadelphia, PA

**Abstract**

This paper follows prior presentations on Charles Williams done in 2006 at the C.S. Lewis and Friends Colloquium. It focuses on the spiritual implications for Williams's "doctrine of substituted love" and his understanding of "the way of exchange." After detailing the principles of the Order formed by Williams in 1939, the three levels of "the household of faith" seen in Williams' poem, "The Founding of the Company," are discussed. The implications of incarnational theology for Williams' "theology of romantic love" and the "Way of Exchange" are seen in the great "fusion" of "flesh knowing what spirit knows" and Williams' belief that "it is in our bodies that the secrets exist." Three types of Christian actions involved in the practice of substituted love are detailed: forgiveness, sacrifice and the bearing of burdens. The paper concludes with an investigation into exactly what Williams meant by the practice of "compact prayer" whereby one person actually undertakes to carry another person's burden of fear, sorrow or even physical pain. Literary examples are cited, and both the spiritual and practical prerequisites for undertaking such compact prayer are delineated.

**Introduction**

Two years ago I presented two papers on Charles Williams. The first, "Charles Williams: Prophet of Glory," focused on his life as an editor at the Oxford University Press, his participation in the Inklings from 1939 to 1945, when the OUP was moved to Oxford, and finally, the profound influence he had on his friends. Several, including Dorothy L. Sayers, felt the spiritual import of what he had to say was in fact "prophetic." My second paper, "Charles Williams: Priest of the Co-inherence," unpacked the basic ideas found in C.W.'s writings, whether his thriller novels, his Arthurian poetry, his poetic dramas, and his theological works. These ideas--of Substitution and Exchange, of the Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation, of Williams' Theology of Romantic Love, all seen as interlocking in what he called "The Co-inherence"--cannot be spelled out here in such detail. You are undoubtedly already familiar with these terms. In this presentation I will focus more explicitly on the spiritual implications of his "doctrine of substituted love." After explaining what Williams meant by "substituted love" and the "way of exchange," I would like to explore how this impacts particularly on our understanding of bearing one another's burdens in prayer.

**Co-Inherence, Substitution and Exchange**

In 1939, the year that Williams came up to Oxford, his biographer tells us that "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." (1) He wrote out a set of principles by which "The Companions of the Co-inherence" were to order their lives. These 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 Messiah . . ." (2)

### **Three Levels of Co-Inherence**

Venturing deeper into this vision of "Co-inherence," let me share the progression of the three levels 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 honorable exchange, labour in the kingdom, devotion in the Church, the need each had of other." Perhaps, since this is the most rudimentary level of existence and involves mere necessary living, working, exchanging money and doing chores, yes, even in the church, we may think of this level as being a "blah" life of rationalized reality. Be that as it may, 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." (3)

This level seems to progress to the level of death to the "proper self" so that, to quote St. Paul, "I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me." According to Williams, this description of the Kingdom of God within a person is a "state of being." It is "intensely dangerous and yet easily neglected." It involves repentance and it involves faith. Williams points out that in John Chapter 8 Christ "demands from His disciples a statement, not of their repentance or righteousness or belief in the I AM, which is what the old prophets clamored for, but of their belief in himself . . . They say "Thou art the Christ." We know what "the Christ" means. It is "The Anointed One." But at the moment, there, it is a kind of incantation, the invocation of a ritual, antique and magical title." (4) Williams proceeds to lay out exactly what has to be in store for those who claim Jesus as "the Christ:"

The Divine Thing approves the salutation. It proceeds to define its destiny. It declares it is to suffer greatly, to be rejected by all the centers of jurisdiction, to be seized and put to death, and after three days it is to rise again from the dead. . . . In all three gospels this definition of its immediate future is followed by a definition of its further nature and future: "the Son of Man" is to be seen in the "glory of his Father and with the holy angels," that is, in the swift and geometrical glory seen by Isaiah and Ezekial, the fire of the wheels and the flash of the living creatures, the terrible crystal and the prism of the covenant above, the pattern of heaven declared in heaven. The formula of the knowledge of this pattern on earth is disclosed: it is the loss of life for the saving of life, "for my sake and the gospel's." It is the denial of the self and the lifting of the cross. (5)

To return to the third level of "the Household of Faith": Williams says that living with this large vision of verse, holding the image of *perichoresis*, "of separateness without separation," "the Company thrive 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 [spiritual Britain] the excellent absurdity held." (6) 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." (7)

### **Exchange and Sacrifice**

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 Trinitarian mystical vision of Love-in-God IS "the web of the Glory," and Williams consistently pronounced it throughout his entire life as Fact.

By now you are probably realizing just how important it is for us to understand that just as Jesus Christ suffered IN THE BODY, died for the salvation of mankind IN THE BODY, and provided the elements of His BODY and BLOOD for us to be united with God both spiritually and physically, so we, too, must be willing to sacrifice our BODIES and the time that our bodies occupy for Christ's glory and for the mystical substitution of our physical energies and love for others from whom we derive our very life as well, in the Co-inherence and "under the Mercy." Mary McDermott Shideler puts it thus: "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." (8) Williams actually goes so far as to make a rather theologically profound and even mysterious declaration when he states, "It is in our bodies that the secrets exist" (9) and the startlingly true statement in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, "Flesh knows what spirit knows, but spirit knows it knows." (10)

### **"Flesh knows what Spirit knows"**

If indeed "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." (11) She continues: ". . . 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 . . ." (12) Just as human romantic love leads to physical union, so the feeling intellect requires the balance of mutual and passionate exchange intellectually. Thus knowledge, as well as being, depends upon exchange. By submitting one's personal experiences and ideas to the authority of others, as we are endeavoring to do here, a person is united with others in a web of what Williams calls "reciprocal derivation" or, more simply perhaps, 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." (13) 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.*" [my emphasis] (14)

Shideler unpacks what she distinguishes as three different aspects of Co-inherence. The first involves seeing the body as an "index" to love, with the flesh supporting all acts of love. The second aspect involves the submitting of what C.W. and the poet Wordsworth call "the feeling intellect" to the mutual exchanges of other people's thoughts and feelings so that all can mature into the life of faith. For the remainder of this presentation I want to look at the third implication of Co-inherence, that of the actual practices that these "new premises" of Incarnational life involve. How do we learn to practice the exchanges of co-inherent love?

### **The Practice of Substituted Love**

Well, 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 can even entail a 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.

#### **1) Forgiveness**

Let me take these in reverse order, if I may, and begin with the necessity of forgiveness. 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 as we forgive those who trespass against us." Early in the treatise "The Forgiveness of Sins," 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." [my emphasis] (15) 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." (16) This is a point I won't belabor as all Christians agree on the necessity of forgiveness in the Christian life.

#### **2) Sacrifice**

The second practice in the life of substituted love, that of sacrifice, goes deeper into the mutuality present in the Co-inherence. Such practices of "mystical substitution" are encountered in rare places in literature. Indeed, Williams himself writes that, among other examples of substitution in the church, the blessed Saint Seraphim of Sarov laid on a certain nun "the ascetic discipline of death, that she should die instead of her sick brother Michael, whose work was not yet done." (17) Sheldon Vanauken mentions the possibility of "mystical substitution" in his book *A Severe Mercy*. This true love story tells how his beloved wife Davy contracts a 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 us 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. (18)

### 3) Bearing Burdens

So great a business of exchange and substitution fills the phrase "bear ye one another's burden" with a much fuller meaning. And so I will wrap up this exploration of co-inherence by sharing some of the practical details of this fuller meaning of bearing burdens. The usual meaning, of course, is that of being sympathetic to another's concern and perhaps even doing exterior acts of kindness and love. Williams says that Christians are not members of a club but rather members of the church, which is not a club. By virtue of our being joined as limbs, members of a living, "Mystical Body," we are to turn our general sympathy into something of immediate and practical use by what he calls a "compact of substitution." Let's listen closely to Williams's instruction:

Compacts can be made for the taking over of the suffering of troubles, and worries, and distresses, as simply and as effectually as an assent is given to the carrying of a parcel. A man can cease to worry about X because his friend has agreed to be worried by X. No doubt this is only a part of casting all our burdens upon the Lord; the point is that it may well be a part of it. . . . one may practice a virtue on behalf of another more easily than for oneself. The mere attention of the mind to such a life of substitution will itself provide instances and opportunities. What is needed is precisely that attention. (19)

Williams continues. Besides attention, common sense is required. "There are as many dangers in that life as in any . . . We have not to promise anything we obviously cannot do. *But perhaps there is very little that could not be done.*" [my emphasis] (20) Williams says that the practice could be begun in small things--sleeplessness or anxiety or slight pains. He also says that the practice could be best begun between friends and lovers. He reminds us that what he is talking about here is ordinary, common life. He says to begin "by practising faith where it is easiest is better than to try and practice it where it is hardest. There is always somewhere where it can be done." (21) Another characteristic of burden-bearing, although it is more an effect than a cause, is that it encourages a state of mind which may perhaps be called "humility," but not so much as a virtue as a mere fact. If our lives are so carried by others and so depend upon others, it becomes impossible to think very highly of them. We then "love from within", or as C.W. explains: "one has a sense of loving precisely from the great web in which the object and we are both combined . . . Such faint feelings may assist us to consider still more intensely the great co-inherence of all life." (22)

I have been quoting from the essay *He Came Down From Heaven*, where Williams states the principles of bearing burdens. In perhaps his most successful novel, *Descent Into Hell*, 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, a ghost 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. 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 . . . 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 . . . (23)

The technique, Williams explains (in *He Came Down From Heaven*) needs practice and intelligence. Any such agreement has three points: (i) to know the burden; (ii) to give up the burden; and (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. (24)

Williams also has some warnings concerning this practice of bearing burdens. 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. Further, he does admit that it is difficult to carry out a burden in the physical world and that "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 . . ." (25)

One last and rather intriguing--perhaps even controversial thing: Williams really believed that such acts of substitution and burden bearing are independent of time and place. In the living web of acts that make up the Glory of God, in the infinite contemporaneity of all things, Williams maintains that mystical acts of exchange are possible beyond the usual categories of linear sequential time and space. In the last play Williams wrote, *The House of the Octopus*, which takes place on a remote island in the Pacific, a native girl has denied the Faith and been killed by the evil emissaries of P'o-l'u, Williams's geographical name for Hell. A faithful servant of the Christian Church on that island says: "She died, even if she lied; she is still a witness. Might not, sir, her first



baptismal vow have swallowed her fault, instead of her faith her vow? *If God is outside time, is it so certain that we know which moments of time count with Him and how?*"[my emphasis] (26) In the last novel he wrote, *All Hallows Eve*, the abused character, Betty, the daughter of the evil black magician Simon the Clerk, is clearly protected from his evil designs on her in some very concrete way from the waters of her Baptism: "And this then was what that strange Rite called Baptism was--a state of being of which water was the material identity, a life rippling and translucent with joy." (27)

Williams certainly laid out his belief in the practical efficacy of this Sacrament of Baptism actually having concrete protective "power to save, to *bear the burden of* oppressive evil, out of time and place but in God." However, I agree with Shideler that we in fact know very little about bearing burdens and still less what could happen. Yet C.S. Lewis has written, with regard to the doctrine of bearing burdens, that "this Williams most seriously maintained, and I have reason to believe that he spoke from experimental knowledge." (28) If Lewis believed that Charles Williams was speaking with utter truth, should we not also believe and follow as Companions of the Christian Way?

## Notes

1. Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 173.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
3. Charles Williams, "The Founding of the Company," in *Taliessin Through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars, and Arthurian Torso* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 156.
4. Charles Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 51.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
6. Charles Williams, "The Founding of the Company," *op. cit.*, p. 159.
7. Mary McDermott Shideler, "Introduction," in *Taliessin Through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars, and Arthurian Torso*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
8. Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 141.
9. Charles Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 109.
10. Cited in Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
14. Cited in Shideler, *Ibid.*, p. 148.
15. Charles Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
17. Charles Williams, "The Way of Exchange," in *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 153.
18. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), pp. 145-146.
19. Charles Williams, "The Way of Exchange," *op. cit.*, pp. 151-2.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
23. Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, reprinted June, 1970), pp. 100-101.
24. Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven*, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
26. Charles Williams, *The House of the Octopus* (London: Edinburgh House, 1945), pp. 70-71.
27. Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 187.
28. Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love*, *op. cit.*, p. 154.