

Review of Garry Williams, “The Definite Intent of Penal Substitution, in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

BY David Allen.

Originally posted at <http://drdavidallen.com/> These reviews can also be found, with slight revisions, in David Allen, The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review, B&H Academic (2016), at pages 657-763.

Garry Williams writes the next two chapters on penal substitution and the double payment argument. The upshot of these two chapters is an attempt to argue the point that penal substitution entails definite atonement and that the double payment argument (that God cannot demand payment for sin twice) is a valid construct and supports definite atonement (461).

We will consider his chapter on the double payment argument in a later post.

First rattle out of the box, Williams comes across as a bit condescending when he states his chapter is “. . . simply intended to show brothers that at this point they are wrong, . . .” It would have been better to word this along the lines of showing brothers “reasons why perhaps they may be wrong in their assessment.”

Williams devotes the major portion of his chapter (462-72) to an evaluation and critique of Archbishop Ussher’s (17th century) and Broughton Knox’s (20th century) views of the extent of the atonement in relationship to penal substitution. Both were Calvinists who affirmed that Christ died for the sins of all people.

Archbishop Ussher.

Williams states Ussher is rightly categorized as a Hypothetical Universalist “given his insistence that Christ’s death was intended to make satisfaction for every person, should he or she believe” (462). This wording can be tricky. What Ussher believed and what Williams is intending to convey about Ussher is that Christ died for the sins of all people, such that if any person believes, he will be saved because there is an atonement made for his sins. As I have noted in previous reviews, what is “hypothetical” about HU is not the extent of the atonement, but the conditionality of the application of the atonement – faith of the individual.

Williams identifies three underlying concerns for Ussher. First is the preaching of the gospel. Ussher believed that an atonement that was not universal in extent could not be the basis for the offer of the gospel to all people (463).

Second, Ussher differentiates between the extent of the atonement and the application of the atonement (463).

Third, Williams claims Ussher taught that Christ did not make satisfaction for any individual specifically, but for human nature *qua* nature (464). It is this third point about Ussher where I think Williams gets it wrong. Williams appears to be reading Ussher's use of the word "nature" to indicate something differentiated from "person." This is not what Ussher means.

His critique of Ussher on this point is lengthy (465-68) and it appears Williams' misunderstands Ussher's use of the term "nature" in context. Ussher is not distinguishing "nature" from "personhood" as Williams contends. Rather, in context, Ussher contrasts the nature of man with the nature of the fallen angels and rightly points out that Christ did not assume angelic nature but only human nature. It is obvious what Ussher means here — Christ suffered the punishment due humanity as composed of individual people.

Williams wants to take this in a direction foreign to Ussher's meaning and intent. He asserts: "On Ussher's view, Christ is a person and made satisfaction as a person, but he did not make satisfaction for persons as such" (465). Consequently, Williams thinks that Ussher's position "logically denies penal substitution" (466). Williams spends the next three and one-half pages tearing down the straw man that Ussher believes human nature is the object of atonement and not sinful human persons.

Broughton Knox.

Williams notes that Knox, like Ussher, is concerned about the well-meant gospel offer and how such is necessitated by an unlimited atonement. Also noted is Knox's point that a commercialistic/pecuniary approach to the atonement undermines definite atonement (468-69).

Williams notes correctly that Knox distinguishes (not "separates," which is the term Williams uses) the extent of the atonement from its application (471). Williams writes as if Knox's distinction between the intent, extent, and application of the atonement is something new and invalid. As we have seen, the distinction antedates the Reformation.

Williams rejects any notion of a distinction between the intent and extent of the atonement, yet offers no biblical justification to prove his point. His argument rests solely on the notion that God's will "makes them [Christ's sufferings] what they are and thus makes them definite" (471). This is simply a non-sequitur, as well as an assertion without support.

Specificity of the Atonement in Scripture.

Williams addresses a few NT and OT texts which he adduces support definite atonement. But not a single one of the verses he cites directly or even indirectly hints at such.

He makes much of the point that “sin” (generic) and “sins” (specific) are not mutual exclusive in use. This is correct. His conclusion, however, does not follow, and is in need of nuance: “Although none of these NT writers were self-consciously addressing our question, they evidently held that Jesus died bearing specific sins committed by particular people” (474).

Actually the NT authors were self-consciously addressing the question of the extent of the atonement in several places. If by “specific” Williams means all specific sins but not in some quantifiable manner, and if by “particular” he means all people individually and not some people individually, then the statement is correct. If, as I suspect, Williams means by “particular people” only the elect, then the statement is an example of begging the question – Williams is assuming what he is trying to prove.

Williams attempts to glean from the instructions given concerning various Levitical offerings that “Levitical atonement was definite atonement” (479). His examples all come from the cases of individuals who bring offerings, which by definition, are definite to that individual.

This says nothing about the extent of the atonement for the nation of Israel, or beyond. It is the logical fallacy of assuming that individual offerings in the OT prove definite atonement. It also ignores the Day of Atonement ritual which addressed the sins of all the people, and works against definite atonement.

Conclusion.

Williams concludes the chapter with a false dilemma (either/or) statement: “An indefinite atonement must either embrace universalism or it must contradict the biblical doctrine of penal substitution” (481).

This conclusion is unwarranted. Williams is trading on a commercialist view of the atonement, which fails to consider the proper biblical notion of imputation of sin, combined with a failure to distinguish properly between the atonement’s extent and application.