

Review of Garry Williams, “Punishment God Cannot Inflict Twice: The Double Payment Argument *Redeivus*,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*

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In chapter 18, Garry Williams addresses the double payment argument.

Owen’s Double Payment Argument.

Classically formulated by John Owen, the double payment argument asserts that God’s justice does not allow the same sin to be punished twice, first in Christ and then in the sinner. Owen’s defense of this argument employs a commercialistic understanding of the atonement, for which he has been rightly criticized by Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike.

Williams begins with John Owen’s statement of the double payment argument, followed by a brief recitation of some Calvinists and non-Calvinists who reject it.

Williams outlines the aim of his chapter: to reexamine and restate the double payment argument (486). He will attempt to extricate the argument from its entanglements with commercialism by reworking it “without the commercial concepts” in the hopes of salvaging it for the defense of definite atonement.

He intends to argue that “punishment should be defined as *suffering inflicted as a fitting answer to sin*. This definition will establish against its critics a double punishment argument that could proceed without any commercial language” (486).

The bulk of this chapter (487-506) is given over to an analysis of the nature of metaphor and specifically the metaphor of punishment as debt repayment. While there is interesting material here, most of this section is extraneous to the argument at hand. The crucial material to support the contention that the double payment argument is a valid construct is found on pages 506-515.

Williams makes an important concession when he states “It is true that the double punishment argument is viable only if the idea of definiteness is retained; if unquantifiability means indefiniteness, then the argument fails” (499). Williams thinks this is a false choice and proceeds to show why.

The gist of John Owen’s double payment argument is that “debt” language in Scripture moves beyond the metaphor and actually describes the mechanism for the payment of sin. Owen, and Williams, assume that since the satisfaction is for “sins” plural, and not for “sin” in abstraction, that it therefore must be definite (limited to only the elect). The transaction is commercial: so much is owed and so much is paid. If Christ paid for all sins, then God cannot demand a second payment from any sinner. Seems like an open and shut case.

Problems with the Double Payment Argument.

The metaphor is pushed beyond its legitimate point of analogy and becomes, for Owen and Williams, the actual mechanism whereby sin is paid for. Williams’ dependence upon Owen’s treatment of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matt 18 leads him to misinterpret the point of the parable. The context of the parable is not atonement but forgiveness between brothers by way of a commercial debt metaphor. The point of the parable is the mechanism for forgiveness, not the mechanism for satisfaction of sins.

Williams concludes that Christ’s satisfaction is a “repayment.” The mistake is viewing God as a creditor from the fact that sin is metaphorically described as a debt (490-93). Sin as debt is about obligation, not about the death of Christ being a payment to a creditor (God). Nowhere in Scripture is God ever viewed as “creditor” who is paid a debt via the death of Christ.

At this point in the discussion Williams should be credited for his accurate portrayal of Hugo Grotius’ view of the nature of the atonement (490-492). Often Grotius is misunderstood and mischaracterized as teaching something less than penal substitution. Williams notes and rebuts this error.

As part of his argument, Williams posits that it is “both possible and necessary to hold together the idea of an unquantifiable punishment and an inherently definite atonement” (499). Recall Williams’ conclusion in his previous chapter that only “sins” were laid on Christ at the cross, not “sin” generically.

This is fundamentally an unnecessary and even flawed bifurcation. No one claims that Christ dies for “sin” without dying for “sins.” Of course Jesus did not die for some abstract

notion of sin. He died for real people; all of them. He accomplished this by becoming “sin” for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ died for “the one and the many,” for “sins” and for “sin.”

In suffering the one death that one and all sinners categorically deserve, He made satisfaction for *all the sins of all the sinners*. The same can be said of *any* other given sin and *any* given sinner.

Even Charles Hodge said,

Christ fulfilled the conditions of the covenant under which all men [not just the elect] were placed. He rendered the obedience required of all [not just the elect], and suffered the penalty which all had incurred [not just the elect]; and therefore his work is equally suited to all [not just the elect].¹

This view is not the position that Christ’s death is “an internally unspecified penal satisfaction narrowed only by its application,” or a view that it “is not an actual, defined answer to any sin committed by any individual,” as if Christ’s death is “detached from any crime” as Williams suggests (507-508). These descriptions by Williams are straw men.

Like Owen, Williams appears to be operating from a sort of quantitative transference view of imputation: specific guilt for specific sins of the elect alone is laid on Christ. But this is problematic.

While our sins are imputed to Christ, before our conversion we remain under the wrath of God as Paul states in Eph. 2:1-3. As Dabney says, God holds the unbelieving elect subject to wrath until they believe. Williams mentions this problem (486) but fails to address this objection by Dabney and others that the living unbelieving elect are under the wrath of God.

Williams also fails to address how God can *justly* postpone the grant of faith to the people for whom Christ died, if Christ literally “purchased” faith for them. Hodge says, “The moment the debt is paid the debtor is free, and that completely. No delay can be admitted, and no conditions can be attached to his deliverance.”²

Owen & Williams’ Faulty View of Imputation.

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:544-5.

² *Ibid.* 2:470-71.

Would Owen consider the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers as the transference of so many acts of law-keeping? It would seem not. Are believers credited with specific acts of righteousness on Christ's part? No, we are credited with a quality of righteousness, or treated as though we had obeyed God's law categorically by virtue of our union with Christ. All of Christ's acts of obedience fall under the somewhat abstract class or moral category of "righteousness."

Just as believers are not imputed with something like so many particular acts of righteousness but rather with righteousness categorically, so also Christ was not imputed with all the particular sinful acts of some people, like so many "sin-bits," but rather with sin in a comprehensive way. He was treated as though he were sinful, or categorically guilty of the sin of the whole human race.

Owen, and it would seem Williams as well, has a faulty notion of imputation. The truth is, Christ died one death that all sinners deserve under the law. In paying the penalty of what one sinner deserves, he paid the penalty of what every sinner deserves. He suffered the curse of the law as defined by the law. Owen's double payment and trilemma arguments undermine the true meaning of imputation and operate on the assumption of the transference of specific sins.

Owen's trilemma *necessarily* operates on the assumption that there was a *quantitative* imputation of sins to Christ. The biblical idea of imputation does not work that way, and Reformed people do not even think of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers in that *quantitative* way.

Charles Hodge, in contrast, has retained the proper understanding of imputation:

What was suitable for one was suitable for all. The righteousness of Christ, the merit of his obedience and death, is needed for justification by each individual of our race, and therefore is needed by all. It is no more appropriate to one man than to another. Christ fulfilled the conditions of the covenant under which all men were placed. He rendered the obedience required of all, and suffered the penalty which all had incurred; and therefore his work is equally suited to all.³

Williams is at odds with Hodge.⁴

³ Ibid.2:544-45.

⁴ Williams fails to note his dissimilarity with Hodge in his brief footnote about Hodge on p. 511.

Misreading of Fuller and Dabney.

Williams is also at odds with Andrew Fuller, whom he quotes (506-07). Williams says, “Fuller distances the nature of the atonement from its design and application” (507). Why? Because Fuller had come to believe in unlimited expiation at the time he wrote the letters to Dr. Ryland that Williams quotes from.

Williams thinks he has Fuller and Dabney over a barrel with his false either/or dilemma (509). He fails to recognize that both men did not think in terms of a quantitative imputation of sin to Christ, unlike Owen! Williams states that both “locate the specificity exclusively in the application of Christ’s work” (510). How can this be? If the specificity is “exclusively” in the application, it cannot be in the extent. Fuller and Dabney are actually advocates for an unlimited imputation of sin to Christ view and not for a quantitative or limited imputation of sin to Christ position.

Williams, Commercialism, and Sufficiency.

Williams is committed to two ideas which are contradictory. He rightly argues against the notion that Christ died for sins in some sort of an equivalentist fashion. Yet simultaneously Williams affirms a limitation in the sins imputed to Christ such that only the sins of the elect are so imputed.

But this carries Williams back to where he does not want to go: a commercialistic/pecuniary view of the atonement resulting in a limited sufficiency in the death of Christ, despite what he says on page 499. A gospel that speaks only of a bare infinite value in Christ’s death is “cold comfort” to those for whom Christ did not die.

As Ussher says,

“A bare sufficiency in Christ does not serve the turn; this would be a cold comfort. Suppose a man who was in debt, afraid of every sergeant and every sheriff, should be told, ‘Sir, there is money enough in the king’s account to discharge all your debts.’ This

may be very true, but what good is that to him? What comfort does he have by it unless the king offers to come and freely assume his debt?”⁵

On the definite atonement scheme of Williams, the nature of the atonement can never be sufficient for the non-elect.

Williams cannot have it both ways.

Williams is dependent on Owen’s articulation of the compatibility of identical satisfaction and delayed application on the basis of the Covenant of Redemption (511). However, as pointed out in my review of Trueman’s chapter, the so called “Covenant of Redemption” lacks biblical support and is problematic on numerous counts. Appeal to the Covenant of Redemption does not answer the problem for definite atonement that the Scripture teaches in Eph. 2:1-3 the unbelieving elect remain under the wrath of God.

Williams’ commercialism is further evidenced as he trades on the false dilemma fallacy when he asserts: “If God punishes all sin, then Christ must have died for the sin of unbelief, and if he did that for all without exception, then all without exception must be saved” (515).

What of Original Sin?

Williams’ tacit dependence upon Owen’s trilemma argument faces some insurmountable problems, not the least of which is the issue of original sin. Notice it is not original “sins” but original “sin.” If Christ died for original sin, then he died for at least one of the sins of the non-elect. If this is the case, then Owen’s argument is defeated for Owen must admit that Christ died for some of the sins (original sin) of all men. It seems that either Owen must say that Christ died for *some of the sins (original sin) of all men*, or he must take the view that Christ only underwent punishment for *some of the sins of some men* (a position not listed in his trilemma).⁶

⁵ James Ussher, “The Satisfaction of Christ,” in *The Puritan Pulpit: The Irish Puritans*, ed., Don Kistler (Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2006), 117.

⁶ As argued, for example, by James Daane, “What Doctrine of Limited Atonement?” *The Reformed Journal* 14:10 (December 1964), 16.

Throughout Williams' chapter he insists on Christ dying for "actual sins," especially on page 508. What he never deals with is the subject of Christ dying for original sin.

Williams, Ussher, and Dabney.

Williams also tries to drive a wedge between Ussher and Dabney. He says, "Unlike Ussher, Robert L. Dabney defended the belief that 'Christ's redeeming work was limited in intention to the elect'" (485).

All Dabney means is a limitation *in the intent to apply*. Does Williams think Ussher was an Arminian? Of course Ussher agreed with the idea that Christ had an effectual intent to apply his death to the elect alone that corresponded to God's purpose in election. All Calvinists, including the broad spectrum of Hypothetical Universalists, agree with that. It's just the case that Ussher grounded the efficacy *in Christ's intercession on behalf of the elect*, not in the death or satisfaction in itself.

Ussher said, "For the universality of the satisfaction derogates nothing from the necessity of the special grace in the application: neither doth the speciality of the one any ways abridge the generality of the other"

At the end of the same work, he wrote,

"And therefore we may safely conclude out of all these premises, that 'the Lamb of God, offering himself a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world,' intended by giving sufficient satisfaction to God's justice, to make the nature of man, which he assumed, a fit subject for mercy and to prepare a medicine for the sins of the whole world, which should be denied to none that intended to take the benefit of it: howsoever he intended not by applying his all-sufficient remedy unto every person in particular to make it effectual unto the salvation of all, or to procure thereby actual pardon for the sins of the whole world."⁷

⁷ Ussher, "The True Intent and Extent of Christ's Death and Satisfaction on the Cross," in *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co., 1864), 12:558-59.

Conclusion.

The double payment argument remains a flawed concept, even with the attempted restatement. Williams wants to proceed without the problematic gaps involved in commercial language, but he ultimately cannot get away from commercial categories and concepts driving his arguments. Owen conceived of Christ's death as a "literal payment," and therefore his double payment and trilemma arguments function on a quantitative conception of the imputation of sin to Christ.

Postscript.

Williams makes a subtle Christological error on p. 498 and wrongly thinks it is compatible with Turretin's statement that he quotes on p. 499.

Williams says, "we must ascribe the properties of one nature [of Christ] to the other because they are both united in one person..." (498). You'll notice that is precisely what Turretin does NOT say in the quote on p. 499. Turretin rightly says that the properties of Christ's natures were really communicated to the person, not necessarily to the other nature.

I think Williams errs on the communication of properties. For example, if, as Williams says, we must ascribe the properties of one nature to the other [nature], then Christ's human nature must be said to be omnipresent, or ubiquitous (among other confusions). This is the confusion that caused some Lutherans to adopt ubiquitarianism.

Turretin has the Antiochian stress and concern for Christ's real humanity, while the Alexandrians had the stress and concern about the unity of Christ's person. We should indeed be zealous about both. Turretin, to protect Christ's real humanity and therefore the identification of His nature with our nature, does not ascribe the properties of Christ's divine nature to His human nature, but Turretin does ascribe the properties of either nature to Christ's person.

In other words, all that can be predicated of either of Christ's natures can be predicated of His person, but what is true of either nature may not necessarily be predicated of the other nature (Jesus, in his human nature, was not omnipresent).

Think of Christ as 1) person, 2) divine nature, 3) human nature. Here is what we can correctly say about Christology: Everything that is true of #2 and #3 is true of #1. But what is true of #2 is not necessarily true of #3.

Williams goes too far and basically says, “one must ascribe the properties of #2 to #3.” That is incorrect. Granted, in some cases, what is true of #2 may be true of #3 (given the image of God in man), with some significant qualifications due to the creator/creature distinctions, but in most cases we must not ascribe the properties of one of Jesus’ natures to the other nature.

This issue is not directly related to Williams’ argument, but it indicates where Williams’ errs in his doctrine of Christology as well as in his interpretation of Turretin.