

ABSTRACT

“Universal Legal Justification: Brief Description and Evaluation”— Universal legal justification attempts to provide a third alternative to the Reformed-Arminian debate over the nature and extent of salvation. This article summarizes some of the most important arguments used by the proponents of universal legal justification to support their theology and provides an evaluation of their view, demonstrating that it does not really provide a third alternative to Arminianism and Calvinism. Further, assuming universal legal justification implies that there is hardly any room left for Christ’s work of mediation before the Father in heaven. Finally, universal legal justification’s interpretation of the Pauline phrases “in Adam” and “in Christ,” as well as its understanding of substitution in connection with the use of the “in Christ” motif, is problematic.

Keywords: Universal legal justification, Arminianism, Calvinism, soteriology, substitution

RESUMEN

“Justificación legal universal: Breve descripción y evaluación”— La justificación legal universal intenta proporcionar una tercera alternativa al debate reformado-arminiano sobre la naturaleza y el alcance de la salvación. Este artículo resume algunos de los argumentos más importantes utilizados por los defensores de la justificación legal universal para apoyar su teología y proporciona una evaluación de su punto de vista, demostrando que en realidad no ofrece una tercera alternativa al arminianismo y al calvinismo. Además, asumir la justificación legal universal implica que casi no queda lugar para la obra de mediación de Cristo ante el Padre en el cielo. Finalmente, la interpretación de la justificación legal universal de las frases paulinas “en Adán” y “en Cristo”, así como su comprensión de la sustitución en relación con el uso del motivo “en Cristo”, es problemática.

Palabras clave: Justificación legal universal, arminianismo, calvinismo, soteriología, sustitución

UNIVERSAL LEGAL JUSTIFICATION: BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION

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Introduction

Universal legal justification¹ (ULJ) attempts to provide a third alternative to the Reformed-Arminian debate over the nature and extent of salvation. While the Calvinist tradition argued that salvation was determined by God through supralapsarian predestination independently of human involvement, Arminianism argued that salvation is offered to every human being, that the Spirit creates in the

1. The recent debate over this topic among Adventists seems to go back to 1950's, when two missionaries, Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, began to study the topic of righteousness by faith from the perspective of the events that took place during the General Conference Session in Minneapolis in 1888. Based on their study they concluded that the message of righteousness by faith was then rejected by the leaders and that they are still withholding it from the church. Wieland and Short took it upon themselves to understand that message and to ask church leaders to accept and proclaim it to the church. (The early history of their movement is found in, *Faith on Trial: A Documentation of 40 Years of Official Dialogue—Letters to and from the General Conference in the Files of Donald K. Short and Robert J. Wieland* [Copyright 1993 by Donald K. Short and Robert J. Wieland].) They developed a soteriology that, they claimed, was the one taught by A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, but that differs in many ways from that of the church. Their movement was from the very beginning confrontational as manifested in their charges against the leaders of the church. The independent ministry they initiated came to be known as the “1888 Message Study Committee.” Jack Sequeira, apparently working independently of Wieland and Short, became one of the most capable expositors of universal legal justification (ULJ). There has been a significant amount of reaction against the soteriology promoted by ULJ. See some of the articles found in the webpage of the Biblical Research Institute: <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/>; and also Steve Bauer, “Universal Legal Justification and Vicarious Atonement,” *Reflections—BRI Newsletter* 24 (October 2008): 3-6. The historical connections with Jones and Waggoner have been explored in George Knight, *A User-Friendly Guide to the 1888 Message* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1998), 67-101; Woodrow Whidden, “Universal Legal Justification in the Writings of E. J. Waggoner,” *Reflections—BRI Newsletter* 22 (April 2008): 6-9; Woodrow Whidden, *E. J. Waggoner: From the Physician of Good News to the Agent of Division* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2008), and found to be, to say the least, not as clear as has been alleged. Some of the theological ideas promoted by ULJ are also found among some evangelical writers. See, for instance, Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

human heart the willingness to accept it, and that humans can choose to accept or reject it. ULJ argues that the Calvinistic position grounds everything on the divine will; that God arbitrarily limits salvation to the elect. The Arminian view, they argue, gives the impression that the salvific effectiveness of the cross is provisional and is only activated through human volition, i.e., when humans choose salvation.

ULJ proposes that a distinction should be made between justification by grace and justification by faith.² The first one is an absolute forensic divine decision by which the whole human race was through the event of the cross legally justified independently of any human involvement. This is called the objective gospel of salvation. This is a rejection of double predestination but not necessarily divine predestination (God predestined the whole human race for salvation and he saved it). It is also a rejection of the ideas that at the cross salvation was only provided for humans and that salvation is the result of a human decision. Justification by faith designates the individuals' appropriation by faith of the salvation that is already theirs. Therefore, the human decision does not activate salvation. Thus, it is claimed, the deficiencies of Calvinism and Arminianism are overcome.

Summary of the Most Important Arguments

Let us summarize some of the most important arguments used by the proponents of ULJ to support their theology. First, ULJ is grounded on a particular understanding of the phrases "in Adam" and "in Christ." The connection with Adam is explained as follows: "Adam in the Garden was the entire human race, for we were all 'in him'. . . . Thus 'in Adam' the entire human race corporately shares his condemnation."³ Since we were all "in him" when he sinned "the whole human race was implicated, or participated, in Adam's act of disobedience."⁴ Christ is the second Adam and he came to undo what Adam did. The phrase "in Christ" is interpreted to mean that the whole human race was "in him" when he died on the cross. In other words, "with His blood, as our 'second Adam,' He redeemed, pur-

2. For an evaluation of this distinction see, Joseph Olstad, "Universal Legal Justification: A Failed Alternative between Calvin and Arminius," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 23, no. 1 (2012): 101-113.

3. "In Search of the Gospel—We Believe: Prepared by the 1888 Message Study Committee," *1888 Message Newsletter Supplement*, March-April 1996, 5.

4. Jack Sequeira, *Beyond Belief: The Promise, the Power, and the Reality of the Everlasting Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 52.

chased, reclaimed, restored to favor, emancipated, delivered, released from death, liberated, *the entire corporate human race* (but individuals can reject Him).⁵ It has been unambiguously stated, “Christ, in His humanity, saved men and women in actuality.”⁶ He reversed what Adam did. Instead of condemnation for all he justified all by grace.⁷ The benefits of the death of Christ were given to the human race on the cross. According to ULJ, Paul was referring to this when he wrote, “The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. . . . Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Rom 5:16, 18).⁸ The implication seems to be that with respect to God, Christ placed the human race in the condition in which Adam originally was, free from condemnation. He saved us before we believed. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor 5:19).

Second, it has been proposed that on the cross Christ was the Substitute of the human race, “incorporating in Himself the entire human race, dying their second death as them as well as instead of them.”⁹ They are able to uphold substitutionary atonement but redefine it and by making a distinction between *actual* substitution and *vicarious* substitution.¹⁰ *Vicarious* substitution is rejected because it allegedly excludes the idea that Jesus took our fallen human nature. *Actual* substitution is upheld because it assumes that Jesus took our sinful nature. He is our substitute in the sense that all humanity was in him: “When He lived a perfect life, all humanity lived a perfect life *in Him*. When He died all humanity died *in Him*.”¹¹ This view of substitution is called shared substitution.

Third, they also argue that those who do not reject the salvation that is already theirs are justified by faith, that is to say, are saved from

5. “In Search of the Gospel,” 7. Emphasis in the original. Jesus did not only purchase *eternal salvation* for us but has “given us the gift in Himself.” Robert J. Wieland, *The 1888 Message: An Introduction* (Paris, OH: Glad Tidings, 1997), 18.

6. Sequeira, *Beyond Belief*, 42-43.

7. “In Search of the Gospel,” 7.

8. All biblical quotations in this article are from the NIV, 1984 edition.

9. “In Search of the Gospel,” 7-8. See also Sequeira, *Beyond Belief*, 39-47.

10. Jack Sequeira, *Saviour of the World: The Humanity of Christ in the Light of the Everlasting Gospel* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1996), 79.

11. *Ibid.*, 134. Emphasis in the original.

the power of sin through sanctification.¹² The idea is that we are saved by grace, without believing, and are sanctified by faith, that is to say, we are made righteous. They argue that “while the justification [by grace] accomplished at the cross legally applies to the entire human race ‘in Christ,’ its gospel proclamation arouses in the receptive human heart a response, an appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to redeem us [moral influence theory]. This faith reconciles the alienated heart to Christ.”¹³ What is faith? It “is revealed as a heart-appreciation of the great love revealed at the cross, irrespective of our desire for reward or fear of hell.”¹⁴ Jesus becomes the model for the Christian life. What he “accomplished by overcoming in His flesh on earth, He can accomplish in the flesh of all who understand the pure gospel and believe in Him truly.”¹⁵ Therefore, they teach perfection of character not only as a legal declaration but as what Christ desires from us.¹⁶ This is something Christ accomplishes through his work in the heavenly sanctuary (the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary). He can transform us into perfect Christians—but no one will ever claim to be perfect; we may not even be conscious of being perfect.¹⁷ The church will experience this in preparation for the return of Christ.

Evaluation of the Theology of Universal Legal Justification

The proponents of ULJ place a valuable emphasis on the objective dimension of salvation. The rejection of a limited view of the atonement based on the concept of double predestination is also welcomed. Their study of soteriology has also been beneficial by providing a partner in dialogue to those interested in the subject. In that dialogue, it is also important to critically examine their basic theological views.

12. Wieland, *The 1888 Message*, 17. They have argued that “justification by faith is experiential, a change of heart, an at-one-ment with God which reconciles the believer to God’s holy law so that he becomes obedient. This is the subjective gospel, an experience which rests by faith on the truths of the objective gospel—that Christ by His sacrifice redeemed and legally justified the entire human race.” “In Search of the Gospel,” 23.

13. “In Search of the Gospel,” 9.

14. Wieland, *The 1888 Message*, 21.

15. *Ibid.*, 53.

16. *Ibid.*, 113.

17. *Ibid.*, 109.

Perhaps in that analysis our first question should be, is their soteriology really a third alternative? It has been argued that such a claim is at least questionable and most probably incorrect.¹⁸ ULJ is fundamentally Arminian. Its proponents recognize that we need to exercise faith in order to appropriate salvation. For instance, we are told that “the objective good news of the gospel is a truth that applies to all humanity, but only those who believe will actually be saved experientially.”¹⁹ This last statement is truly Arminian! The individual is actually saved through subjective justification. One could ask, what is, then, the purpose of ULJ? The answer would be that it describes the status of the human race from the divine perspective. God does no longer see the race as lost because the whole human race has been justified and saved. Is that so?

If the salvific benefits of the death of Christ were granted to the human race on the cross,²⁰ there is hardly any room left for Christ’s

18. Olstad, “Universal Legal Justification,” 98-106.

19. Sequeira, *Saviour of the World*, 49. He also writes, “God created human beings with a free will (see Acts 5:3, 4). His supreme gift [ULJ] demands a human response in order for it to be made effective (see Romans 5:17). That necessary response is faith.” *Ibid.*, 135.

20. The key passage used by promoters of ULJ is Rom 5:18: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass [εἰς] was condemnation for [εἰς] all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness [εἰς] was justification that brings [εἰς] life for all men.” The argument is that the phrase “all men” should designate in both cases the totality of the human race. All were condemned because of the sin of Adam and all were justified because of the righteous act of Jesus. There is no verb in this verse; translators supply the verb “was.” Its interpretation has to rely on the context and the meaning of the preposition εἰς. In the Greek word order, the first usage of the preposition εἰς is quite clear; it serves to identify those “to whom the act of Adam and Christ extends (‘to all’), that is to say, the penalty or benefits are intended for all.” David A. Sapp, *An Introduction to Adam Christology in Paul: A History of Interpretation, the Jewish Background, and an Exegesis of Romans 5:12-21* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990), 326. The second usage is a little more complicated because it indicates purpose or intended result and it takes not an object but a relationship or a condition—“condemnation,” “justification.” At this point it is important to keep in mind that *the usage of the preposition does not indicate by itself whether the purpose it points to is actually realized or simply aimed at*. This is to be decided by the context. See M. J. Harris, “Prepositions and Theology in the Greek NT,” *NIDNTT*, 3:118; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 152-153; cf. Rom 10:1; 12:3; Col 3:10. ULJ argues that if in the case of Adam its purpose was actually realized—his action resulted in the condemnation of all—it must have the same meaning with respect to Christ—his obedience resulted in justification for all. This is a logical argument but it is valid only if we are willing to embrace universalism. The condition

work of mediation *before the Father* in heaven. Paul keeps together the death of Christ and his mediation: “Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Rom 8:34). Mediation means that human sin and guilt are not irrelevant before the Lord in heaven and that it is only through the work of Christ for us in the presence of the Father that we receive the benefits of his sacrificial death. *Guilt and sin continue to be part of the human experience in the sight of God!* That makes the role of our Mediator before the Father an indispensable element in the plan of salvation. Hence, we must ask, if it were true that in the sight of God the sin of the human race was already forgiven, why will John say to us, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1)? John goes on to suggest that the forgiveness of sin through the effectiveness of the mediation of Christ before the Father is assured because “he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2). Christ is the Mediator for anyone who wants to approach the Father through him. When ULJ is taken to its logical conclusion little room is left for the doctrine of mediation in the heavenly sanctuary. In fact, that doctrine is interpreted in terms of the cleansing of the human heart from sin (sanctification) through the work of the Spirit in our lives. But the doctrine is much more than that; it deals with the work of Christ in heaven and the application of the benefits of his sacrifice to repentant sinners. The proponents of ULJ do not seem to be fully aware of this serious doctrinal and theological problem.

ULJ stands or falls on their understanding of the Pauline phrases “in Adam” and “in Christ.” This appears to be the most serious weakness in this soteriology. When the phrase “in Adam” is interpreted to mean that we all were in Adam, we have to ask in what sense was

in which we found ourselves as a result of Adam’s sin was *unavoidable* and *permanent*. Therefore, the condition in which “all” find themselves as a result of the obedience of Jesus would have to be *unavoidable* and *permanent*, not related at all to a personal commitment of faith to Jesus. But this conclusion cannot be supported by the rest of the Bible and there is no reason to introduce it in our interpretation of Rom 5:18. The best solution is to acknowledge that in the case of Adam the preposition εἰς (“for, to”) refers to the actual result of his action—it brought death for all—, but that in the case of Christ justification is intended for all but that not all will be justified because it has to be received, accepted (Rom 5:17).

everybody in Adam. Obviously, it did not happen in a physical sense because Adam was one single body. Once we rule out that possibility, there are not many other options left. Our presence in Adam has, then, to be defined by them as trans-physical. But in what sense was it trans-physical? They do not provide an answer to that question. According to the Bible every person is an indivisible self-conscious unity of life. The concreteness and individuality of a human being makes it impossible for anyone to exist or be present in any form or shape in another human being. Biblical anthropology makes it impossible for persons to merge their personalities in a mystical way into each other. There is nothing in a person, inside the body, that pre-existed the bodily existence of that particular individual. To argue that I was in Adam before I came into existence in my present bodily form is to imply that I, or some part/aspect of me, existed in Adam independently of my body and my present existence. This is dangerously close to Greek anthropological dualism.

It appears to me that their understanding of the phrase “in Christ” lacks clear biblical support. This phrase is used many times in the NT and it always refers to the strong union that exists between believers and Christ. It never describes the condition of unbelievers and much less of the whole world of sinners.²¹

21. Sequeira raises the question, “How could God collect and put all humans into Christ 4,000 years after creation? This may seem impossible from a human standpoint, but let’s not forget that ‘with God all things are possible’ (Matthew 19:26).” Sequeira, *Saviour of the World*, 40. He concludes that this is a mystery. This realistic, ontological, participatory soteriology is very problematic. In fact, as we pointed out, human individuality excludes it as a possibility. It is impossible to participate *in* other people! This view is very close to “the platonic doctrine of participation, according to which particulars participate or share in the universal forms or ideas (e.g., ‘men’ participate in the idea of ‘man’). Participation in Christ would then involve a relation to Christ through some type of universal, such as ‘man,’ ‘humanity,’ ‘body,’ or ‘flesh,’ that is common to all human beings, including Christ. In fact, it is possible to regard Christ himself as some type of universal figure or archetypal ‘man’ in whom others participate. Such views raise the same problems as Plato’s doctrine of ideas. Precisely how particulars can participate in universals is a question that neither Plato nor his later interpreters were able to resolve satisfactorily.” David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle’s Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 155. Of course, we would add that such ideas are foreign to the Bible. Yet, they are of essential importance for ULJ. We are told that the “in Christ” motif is “based on the biblical teaching that the whole human race shares a common life and therefore is considered to be a single unit.” Sequeira, *Saviour of the World*, 37. “He [Jesus] was not one man only among men, but in him all humanity was gathered up. And thus now, as at all time, humankind

It is an experiential reality referring to the most intimate union possible between the risen Christ and the believer. Because the believer is united with the living Lord through the indwelling of His Spirit, he or she is made a part of the saving events of Christ's death and resurrection and included in the body of Christ, the Church. As a result, the believer personally receives all the blessings of salvation that flow from Christ and exists in the fellowship of believers.²²

This leads us to the question of substitution. ULJ's understanding of substitution is problematic. The use of the "in Christ" motif to explain it is not particularly clear. Their distinction between *actual* substitution and *vicarious* substitution is also questionable. According to the dictionary "vicarious" designates enduring or suffering in place of another.²³ This is the common usage of the term among Adventists and is not different at all from what was the traditional usage of the term substitution (taking the place of another).²⁴ The "in Christ" view of substitution appears to introduce an inconsistency in the discus-

are, so to speak, organically united with him. His acts are in a true sense our acts, so far as we realize the union." Ibid., 42. "When God's Son took on flesh, he truly and bodily took on, out of pure grace, our being, our nature, ourselves. . . . Now we are in him." Ibid., 43. Interestingly, according to this view what unites us to Christ is not the Spirit but an entity called "humanity" in which both Christ and humans participate. I must say that the views promoted by ULJ are extremely close to Karl Barth. See his volume on reconciliation: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

22. Ivan T. Blazen, *A Call to Ministry: Receiving the Stamp of the Cross; Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 67.

23. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 176. When "vicarious" is used for punishment it means, "endured or suffered by one person in place of another." A "vicarious sacrifice" is basically the same as "punishment by substitution."

24. Sequeira is aware of the definition of vicarious found in dictionaries and has recently indicated that he believes in vicarious substitution. What he wants to do is to connect substitution with the fallen human nature that Christ took and redefine it in terms of being in Christ. See "Jack Sequeira's Response to Stephen Bauer," unpublished, n.d. He has not proven his point. This shared substitution is problematic in the light of Scripture. Quoting John 15:13 and 10:15, Bauer comments, "In these two passages, as well as in other places, Christ depicts His death as a death *for*, that is, *in place of* us, not *as* us. When one lays down his life for friends, he is not dying *as* them or *with* them. He dies *for* them, and presumably, would die for one friend, not just two or more friends. Likewise the shepherd is ready to die, not *as* His sheep or *with* His sheep, but *for* His sheep. . . . Both friends and sheep are saved from dying by the friend or shepherd who dies for them." Bauer, "Universal Legal Justification," 5. Emphasis in the original.

sion. The Scripture indicates that Christ died in our place bearing the penalty for our sin in order to free us from that penalty. The “in Christ” understanding of substitution unintentionally suggests that on the cross we died in him,²⁵ that is to say, he did not die for me! I actually died on the cross for my own sins in him! This gives the impression that I was not saved through Jesus but that I saved myself through Jesus! In other words, since I was in Jesus, my sin was not transferred to him. In Jesus I took my own sin to the cross! Therefore, he was not my substitute! Of course, this is not what they mean. ULJ needs to carefully examine the implications of the language and images they use in order to avoid theological confusion. The “in Christ” view of substitution and the biblical view of substitution appear to be incompatible.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the intentions of the leaders of ULJ are good and even legitimate. There is hardly any other biblical topic as important as the atonement. The question is whether what they bring to the table is biblically sound. The fact that the language they use is far from clear and that they introduce into the discussion new definitions of well-known theological terms contribute to make it difficult to clearly understand the biblical basis of their soteriology. Their understanding of the phrases “in Adam/in Christ” is colored by an element of mysticism that seems to be foreign to the biblical text. Their

25. The main passage used to support this assertion is 2 Cor 5:14: “We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.” The argument is that “all” means the human race. If that is the case, we must ask about the nature of the death attributed to “all.” Although there is no explicit definition of the death of the “all,” its nature is implicitly suggested in v. 15 when Paul says, “*And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*” Emphasis added. Those who are alive are those who died to self and were also resurrected with Christ to a new life. The only death implicit in the context, apart from the physical death of Christ on the cross, is death to our selfish nature to sin. The connection between the death of Christ and the death of the believer to self is part of Paul’s theology and teaching (Rom 6:1-6). If we were to insist that “all” refers in both cases to the human race, then, based on Paul’s understanding of the death of Christ, the best interpretation would be the potential: When Christ died all potentially died only in the sense that they were given the possibility of not only escaping their deserved destiny of eternal death but also of living for their Savior. Death was no longer the inexorable destiny of the human race. His death is the death of “all” because he, as their substitute, experienced the death all deserved.

attempt to combine elements from the theology of Calvin with aspects of Aminianism does not appear to be healthy. As we have suggested, their position is fundamentally Arminian. Nevertheless, listening to them and dialoguing with them have been a useful experience.

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