

Legal Universal Justification: Brief Description and Evaluation
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November 18, 2010
Adventist Theological Society, at the Evangelical Theological Society
2010 Fall Symposium - Righteousness by Faith

[Transcriber's Note: No pre-existing transcript of this talk was located by a search on the ATS or BRI web sites. This transcription was done April 7, 2013, by the speech-to-text function of the Mac OS X 10.8, with manual editing afterward. The quality of the audio at times made it difficult to determine each precise word. Paragraph breaks were provided based on the inherent changes of topics. Occasionally the location of quote marks, particularly end quote marks, are uncertain. --Fred Bischoff]

I'm going to in the introduction try to provide the theological goals or main goal, as I understand it, of legal universal justification. This is an introduction to try to provide what I think is the main goal. Then I'm going to summarize some of the key theological arguments that are used to support this theology. And finally I'm going to provide a brief evaluation of those arguments.

Legal universal justification attempts to provide a third alternative to the Reformed-Arminian debate over the nature and extent of salvation. While the Calvinist tradition argues that salvation was determined by God through super-lapsarian predestination independent of human involvement, Arminianism argued that salvation is offered to every human being, that the Spirit creates in the human heart the willingness to accept it, and that humans can choose to accept or reject it. Universal legal justification argues that the Calvinistic position grounds everything on the divine will, that God arbitrarily limits salvation to the elect. The Armenian view, they argue, gives the impression that the salvific effectiveness of the cross is provisional, and is only activated through human volition; that is to say, when humans choose salvation.

Legal universal justification proposes that a distinction should be made between justification by grace and justification by faith. The first one is an absolute forensic, divine decision by which the whole human race was through the event of the cross legally justified independent of any

human involvement. This is called the objective gospel of salvation. This is a rejection of double predestination but not necessarily of divine predestination. It is also a rejection of the ideas that at the cross salvation was only provided for human beings and that salvation is a result of a human decision. Justification by faith designates the individual's 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.

Now let's summarize some of the most important arguments used by the proponents of universal legal justification to support their theology. First, universal legal justification is grounded on a particular understanding of the phrases "in Christ" and "in Adam." The connection with Adam is explained as follows. Let me quote. "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." Since we are in him when he sinned, the whole human race was implicated or participated in Adam's act of disobedience. Christ is the second Adam, and He came to undo what Adam did. So 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, purchased, reclaimed, restored to favor, emancipated, delivered, released from death, liberated the entire corporate human race." It has also been unambiguously stated, "Christ in his humanity saved men and women in actuality. He reversed what Adam did. Instead of condemnation for all, He justified all by grace. The benefits of the death of Christ were given to the human race on the cross." According to them 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 the one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all

men." Romans 5:16 and 18. 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. This is the first line of argument, as I seen them.

Second, it has been proposed that on the cross Christ was the substitute of the human race, incorporating in Him the entire human race, dying their second death as them as well as instead of them. The proponents of this theology are able to uphold substitutionary atonement by redefining it, and by making a distinction between actual substitution and vicarious substitution. Vicarious substitution is rejected by them because it allegedly excludes the idea that Jesus took our fallen human nature. Actual substitution is upheld because it assumes that Jesus took our fallen sinful nature. He is our substitute, they say, in the sense that all humans were in him. I quote, "When He lived a perfect life, all humanity lived a perfect life in Him. When He died, all humanity died in Him." 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 the power of sin through sanctification. The idea is that we are saved by grace without believing, and we are sanctified by faith, that is to say, we are made righteous. They argue that while the justification by grace accomplished on 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. (That's probably an element of moral influence theory there.) This faith reconciles the alienated heart to Christ, and to the question, 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. 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.

Therefore, they teach perfection of character, not only as a legal declaration, but as what Christ desires from us. This is something accomplished that Christ accomplishes through His work in the heavenly sanctuary, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. He can transform us into perfect Christians. But of course no one will ever claim to be perfectly. We may not even be conscious of being perfect, as they claim. The church will experience this perfection as it prepares for the return of the Lord.

Now these are a summary as I view them, their main arguments they use to establish the theological basis for their position.

Now let me deal with comments about the theological positions taken and the arguments. The proponents of universal legal justification place a valuable emphasis on the objective dimension of salvation. That's good. The rejection of the limited view of the atonement based on the concept of double predestination is welcomed. It's a good thing. Their study of soteriology has also been beneficial to the church 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.

Perhaps in this analysis our first question should be, is their soteriology really a third alternate? You remember, between Reformed and Arminian positions. It has been argued that such a claim is--I would say, at least questionable--but it has been argued that it is incorrect. Universal legal justification is fundamentally Armenian. Its proponents recognize that we need to exercise faith in order to appropriate salvation. For instance, we're told that "the objective good news of the gospel is the truth that applies to all humanity, but only those who believe will actually be saved experientially." This is Arminianism.

The individual is actually saved through subjective justification. What one could ask, and I could ask, what then is the purpose of universal legal justification, the so-called justification by

grace, if I have to appropriate it in order to be saved. The answer, I'm now assuming, their answer would be that universal legal justification 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. You follow the argument? This is from the divine perspective. I'm not sure that this is where they are going, but my reading gives me the impression that that is what they would say. And my question is, is that so?

If the salvific benefits of the death of Christ were granted to the human race on the cross, all the benefits, there is hardly any room left for Christ's 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, He was raised to life. He is at the right hand of God, and He is also interceding for us." Romans 8:34. So mediation means that human sin and guilt are not irrelevant before the Lord in Heaven. And that it is only because of 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.

So we must ask one more question. If it were true that in the sight of God that the sin of the human race was already forgiven, past, present, and future, why would 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 to us because He is the atoning sacrifice. So he's not separating the death of Christ on the cross from mediation. Christ is the mediator for anyone who wants to approach the Father through Him.

When universal legal justification is taken to its logical conclusion, little room is left for the doctrine of the mediation of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. In fact, the doctrine is reinterpreted by them in terms of the cleansing of the human heart from sin, sanctification.

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 legal universal justification, I don't think, are fully aware of this serious doctrinal and theological challenge.

Universal legal justification stands or falls under understanding of the phrases "in Adam" and "in Christ." This appears to be most, in my opinion, serious weakness in their soteriology. When the phrase "in Adam" is interpreted to mean that we all were in Adam, then we have to ask, in what sense was everyone, every human being in Adam? Obviously it did not happen in a physical sense because Adam was one single body. Once we've ruled out that possibility, there are not many other options left. Our presence in Adam has then to be defined by them probably as trans-physical. But in what sense is it trans-physical? I haven't found an answer.

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 in my opinion for anyone to exist or be present in any form or shape in other human being. Biblical anthropology makes it impossible for persons to merge their personalities in a mystical way into each other. There's nothing in the person inside the body that preexisted the bodily existence of that particular individual. This is biblical anthropology, if I understand correctly.

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 or aspect of me existed in Adam independent of my present bodily existence. And I consider this to be dangerously close to Greek anthropological dualism.

It also appears to me that their understanding of the phrase "in Christ" lacks clear Biblical support. This phrase is used many times in the New Testament, particularly in Paul, 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.

The way this is described is confusing. Let me quote from a writer. He asks, "How could God collect and put all humans into Christ four thousand years after creation?" Did you hear the question? This is a question they ask. "How could God collect and put all humans into Christ four thousand years after creation?" The answer--"This may seem impossible from a human standpoint, but let's not forget that with God all things are possible." A final conclusion for them is--it is a mystery.

Now this realistic ontological participatory soteriology is very problematic. In fact, as we already indicated, human individuality excludes this possibility. This view is very close to the Platonic doctrine of participation, according to which particulars participate or share in the universal forms or ideas. For instance, men, every man, participate in the idea of man. Participation in Christ would then involve a relation to Christ through some type of universal, such as humanity, body, or flesh. In this case, in this theology, it is humanity. Christ participated in our humanity; we participate in humanity. So there is an element, an idea of humanity from which Christ takes, and we take, and we are one. Such views raise serious problems. In fact, the Platonic idea or concept of participating, that the singular participates in the idea, is very problematic. How particulars can participate in universals is a question that neither Plato nor his later interpreters were able to resolve.

Of course, I would add that such ideas are foreign to the Bible. But they are essential to universal legal justification. 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. Jesus was not one man only among men, but in Him all humanity was gathered up, and thus now, as at all times, human kind is, so to speak, organically united to Him.

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. It's very close to Barth's theology.

So the "in Christ" motif in the New Testament is limited to believers, 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 personality receives all the blessings of salvation that flow from Christ and exist in the fellowship of believers. This is the "in Christ" in the New Testament.

And this leads me to the next question before getting to the conclusion--the question of substitution. The understanding of substitution in the universal legal theological framework seems to be a little problematic also. The use of the phrase "in Christ" to explain substitution is not in my opinion particularly clear. Their distinction between actual substitution and vicarious substitution is, to say the least, questionable. According to the dictionary, "vicarious" designates enduring or suffering in place of another. This is the common use of the term among Adventists, and it's not different from the traditional usage of the term "substitution."

The "in Christ" view of substitution appears to introduce an inconsistency in the discussion. The Scripture indicates that Christ died in our place bearing the penalty for our sin in order to free us from the penalty. I think this is what the Bible teaches. The "in Christ" understanding of substitution, I would say, unintentionally suggests that on the cross we died in Him; 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--and listen, this is an impression, okay. 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. I don't think so, but this is the impression that comes clear reading them. Universal legal justification 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 me to be incompatible.

And now I go to the conclusion. It is obvious that the intentions of the leaders of universal legal justification are good, and legitimate, I would say. 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" and "in Christ" is colored by an element of mysticism that seems to be foreign to the Biblical text. Their attempt to combine elements from the theology of Calvin with aspects of Arminianism does not appear to be helpful. As we have suggested, their position is fundamentally Arminian. Nevertheless, listening to them, and dialoging with them has been a useful and fruitful experience.

Thank you, very much.