

Some Problems with an Article entitled “Some Problems with Legal Universal Justification” by Dr. Angel Rodriguez’

A Response by David L Wilson

1. “Justification” in itself is a legal term. It is almost redundant to speak of a “legal justification”, however, doubtless individuals have applied the term “legal” to it in order to separate it from the “making righteous” of the individual that takes place in the new birth. This being the case, “legal universal justification” is not a denial of nor is it mutually exclusive of the legal justification that takes place in the new birth. Dr. Rodriguez’ point here is a straw man and not indicative of the true position of many, if not most proponents of a universal justification effected by the cross alone. It is agreed that the world’s being justified at the cross is viewed as a totally free gift apart from the individual acceptance of the gift of faith, whereby one becomes a partaker of the Divine Nature, a Son of God and a recipient of Holy Spirit, whose indwelling presence brings with it the righteousness of God. It is not however, a denial of that “justification” which is by faith.

2. A universal legal justification does not necessarily deny that human beings come into the world lost. From birth fallen men tend to resist the grace of God that would save them eternally if they would not resist. The question that begs to be asked is, how did God venture to give fallen men life, so they might even have the opportunity to resist or accept? Is it not because His only-begotten Son became the bread from heaven that gives life unto the world? If he did this, did he not save the world from death? If the Son of God died under a condemnation that all men should and would have died under, did He not lift the same condemnation from them? Does this not indicate that a “free gift came upon all men unto justification of life”, just as the words of Scripture explicitly state? Rom. 5:18

3. Legal universal justification as taught by many affirms the Biblical solidarity of the human race. Dr. Rodriguez makes an assertion here, but no Bible text is given for reference. In response, I am supplying the reader with a text that plainly affirms the identification of the human race in Adam and in Christ. “For as in Adam, all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” 1 Corinthians 15:22 The attempts of the learned scribes to explain this away notwithstanding, this text still says what it says. Let mortals fear and tremble lest their words be found to contradict those of Almighty God.

4. Dr. Rodriguez states, “Nowhere in the NT does it (the term “in Christ”) refer to the totality of the human race as being present in Christ at the cross.” While one may not find a passage that says explicitly “all men were in Christ at the cross”, A.T. Jones, W.W. Prescott, and numerous other well respected individuals within our church have found numerous passages that indicate in one way or another that the entire human race was represented in Christ’s death at the Cross. Why is Dr. Rodriguez using an official website of the church in an attempt to make his brethren look foolish? I believe this is shameful. Here is just one of the passages that in recent times and historically has been understood to indicate this involvement. “For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge that if one died for all, then all died.” 2 Corinthians 5:14 In contrast, to the assertion that “in Christ” only refers to believers, we have already cited a text that plainly affirms the entire human race “in Christ”. See 1 Corinthians 15:22.

5. Dr. Rodriguez states, “If we were in Christ as we were in Adam, then we make some type of contribution to our own salvation.” Here is a straw man. This is no more true than the suggestion that since we were all in Adam, we in some personal way contributed to the fall of man. The Bible plainly does not teach either, neither do any proponents of universal legal justification of which I am aware.

6. According to Dr. Rodriguez, “Legal universal justification undermines the biblical teaching that Christ bore our sins and their penalty on the cross.” On the contrary, the corporate identification of the human race with Christ gives the only Biblical and logical means whereby Christ could become our Representative and thus bear our sins and their penalty on the cross.

7. Dr. Rodriguez’ says, “By Christ’s substitutionary death it is traditionally meant that Christ alone took our sin and its penalty on Him and died in our place...” Do his brethren, really deny that it is Christ alone

who took our sin and died in our place? I don't think so. Perhaps the term "shared substitution" is a confusing term. How about this one? Vicarious atonement. Yes, the point is that Jesus died "in our place". That must mean that He was doing this on our account; as our Vicar or Representative. Jesus died for us in such a way so that before God it would be considered as our death. If God considers it so, who is man to call Him a liar? Jesus tasted "death for every man". Heb. 2:9 That is the point. Adventists have always taught that Christ death on the cross was a universal; an accomplishment for the whole world. Dr. Rodriguez' argument would appear to place the unlimited atonement of the Cross in jeopardy. Does Dr. Rodriguez really mean to suggest that Jesus only dies for the sins that are transferred to him through the confession of believers? Does the unlimited atonement really deny the transfer of sin? The Bible unequivocally and explicitly teaches that the sins of the whole world were propitiated by Christ's sacrifice. We cannot accept the proposition that the unlimited atonement accomplished at Calvary is in contradiction to the atonement of the believer that is accomplished through faith, repentance, and confession. It may be true of course, that some of us have not presented these things in a perfectly clear manner. It would be nice if Dr. Rodriguez could give his brethren a fair chance to explain themselves, rather than simply trying to discredit them by implying that they teach things that by in large, they do not teach, but explicitly deny. In my humble opinion, that is not fair debate.

8. Dr. Rodriguez states, "Universal legal justification tends to see faith as a threat to Christ's objective work of salvation." In reality, proponents of this teaching see faith as the wonderful gift of God, inspired totally by His grace, placed in the soul of men entirely at His initiative, as the natural outgrowth of the objective good news of the reconciling act of Christ on the Cross of Calvary. Those who deny the universal reconciling work of Christ at the cross are in danger of defining faith outside of the important context of it being a "heart appreciation of the love of God revealed at the cross". If we do not believe in, or adequately appreciate what took place at Calvary, we are in danger of teaching a "faith" that is self-inspired, rather than Christ inspired.

Conclusion: Unfortunately, Dr. Rodriguez has brought the tactics in the debate concerning the "1888 Message" to a shameful low point with this article. Instead of addressing what is actually being taught in the church concerning "universal legal justification", he has chosen to express his disdain for what he feels are the implications of this teaching. Doubtless, those of us who have been trying to affirm the teaching of a "universal justification" have made some mistakes. Nevertheless, it would appear that no one in Adventism who actually teaches a "universal legal justification" accomplished by the cross, has ever come to believe or teach all the things that Dr. Rodriguez suggests are the logical conclusions to this doctrine. The nagging question that haunts the reader is, 'Why would the respected professor go to such lengths, making numerous assumptions, unfounded assertions and frank misrepresentations of the real teaching of universal, legal justification as it is being presented among us today?' We pray that it is a simple misunderstanding of our position and a sincere alarm based on preconceived assumptions as to our teaching, rather than a symptom of ill will.

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