

“Legal Justification”: Is It a Valid Concept?

(An Existential Challenge for the SDA Church and the 1888MSC)

By

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Introduction

“Legal Justification” is not a new term. Although it is new to many in the context of Adventism, the term “legal justification” was used during the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. This is one of the reasons urged *against* its use today. The term “legal justification” actually presents with two sets of “baggage” in the context of Adventism. There is the Reformation concept of “legal justification” and there is the term used by Dr. Desmond Ford in his explanation of righteousness by faith. These two historical references are in themselves reason enough to avoid the terms “forensic justification” and “legal justification” if one desires to avoid misunderstanding. And in the context of the 1888 message the term “legal justification” has certainly been misunderstood.

Perhaps the first reason the term “legal justification” has been misunderstood, is that many who have a knowledge of the Reformation use of the term “forensic justification”, which has the same dictionary meaning as “legal justification”, assume that in the context of the 1888 message the term “legal justification” carries the same meaning and implications as “forensic justification” in the context of Reformation theology. They do not. According to reformation theology, one is “legally justified” when he/she believes in Christ. This is the essence of the Reformation understanding of justification and salvation by faith. This is not what the 1888 Message Study Committee means by the term “legal justification”. Desmond Ford’s use of the terms was the same as the reformation definition. Thus many are immediately confused by the term “legal justification”.

Possible Terminology Clarification

Another legitimate reason to avoid the term “legal justification” in the context of the 1888 message is the fact that it tends to communicate the erroneous notion that only the first phase of justification has legal ramifications, when in fact justification by faith (the second phase of justification) also has legal ramifications. When we are justified by faith, we are also born again and experientially reconciled to God. But since the law is the transcript of God’s character, we cannot be experientially reconciled to God without being to some degree reconciled to the moral law. Thus our hearts, which formerly were in rebellion against God’s law, are then brought into harmony with the law. This is a legal dimension of the second phase of justification referred to a justification by faith.

Therefore, there are both historical and contemporary objections to the term “legal justification”. It tends to produce confusion with the use of other theologians and it lends itself to communicating a misconception of justification by faith.¹ The concept which the 1888 Message Study Committee has been teaching may be better communicated by the term “corporate universal justification”. For the sake of clarity, the term “legal justification” might be reserved to refer to the Reformation concept. We might use “forensic justification” to refer to Desmond Ford’s understanding of justification. And we could use the term “corporate universal justification” to refer to the 1888 Message concept.

The Reformer’s Perspective

Below is a passage in which John Calvin describes the term “legal justification” as an “elegant term” for justification by faith.

Thus it is said, in Paul’s discourse in the Acts, “Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by him all that believe are justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses,” (Acts 13: 38, 39.) You see that after remission of sins justification is set down by way of explanation; you see plainly that it is used for acquittal; you see how it cannot be obtained by the works of the law; you see that it is entirely through the interposition of Christ; you see that it is obtained by faith; you see, in fine, that satisfaction intervenes, since it is said that we are justified from our sins by Christ. Thus when the publican is said to have gone down to his house “justified,” (Luke 18: 14,) it cannot be held that he obtained this justification by any merit of works. All that is said is, that after obtaining the pardon of sins

¹ Pastor Jerry Finneman recently summarized an 1888 understanding of justification. He said “There is one justification; and it is legal; and it has two phases”.

he was regarded in the sight of God as righteous. He was justified, therefore, not by any approval of works, but by gratuitous acquittal on the part of God. Hence Ambrose elegantly terms confession of sins "legal justification," (Ambrose on Psalm 118 Sermon. 10).²

John Calvin was one of the foremost thought leaders of the Reformation and he did not have an understanding of the two phases of justification. He saw no benefits from Christ's work to the unbelievers. He wrote:

... so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us.³

1888 MSC Perspective

The term "legal justification" or corporate universal justification has always meant something different to the 1888 Message Study Committee. It has always been perceived to be both different and superior to the Reformation understanding. Pastor Robert Wieland, a thought leader in the 1888 movement wrote:

If the 1888 message of justification by faith was the beginning of the latter rain and loud cry, reason compels us to recognize that it was truth more clearly revealed than had been seen by any previous generation of God's people since the former rain was bestowed at Pentecost.⁴

Note that the Reformation understanding came over fourteen centuries after Pentecost. But the 1888 message is superior to anything since Pentecost. This rather bold claim is supported by a Spirit of Prophecy reference.

Great truths that have lain unheeded and unseen since the day of Pentecost, are to shine from God's word in their native purity. To those who truly love God the Holy Spirit will reveal truths that have faded from the mind, and will also reveal truths that are entirely new (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 473)⁵

Next Pastor Wieland argues his case for the superiority of the 1888 Message in these words:

How could the 1888 message be a mere reemphasis of sixteenth-century concepts, important as the Reformers' doctrines were for their generation? Ellen White said that the 1888 message of justification by faith was "the third angel's message in verity" (*Review and Herald*, April 1, 1890). If the 1888 message of justification was the same as Luther taught, L. R. Conradi was right when he said that Luther taught the third angel's message in his day and that there is no real justification for the existence of Seventh-day

² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Three, Chapter 11

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Three, Chapter 1, paragraph 1

⁴ Robert Wieland, *The 1888 Message and Introduction*, p. 73, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979

⁵ Quoted by Robert Wieland, in *The 1888 Message an Introduction*, p. 73

Adventists (see L. R. Conradi, *The Founders of the Seventh Day Adventist Denomination*, pp. 60-62).

Since the 1888 concept of justification by faith was recognized as the third angel's message *in verity*, it follows that there must be something unique in it that sets it apart from popular evangelical ideas. If it is the same message proclaimed by theologians and evangelists of Sunday-keeping churches, then the question does become a serious one: What reason do Seventh-day Adventists have for existing?⁶

Although the term “legal justification” has caused confusion, especially for those who are familiar with Reformation theology, the one who introduced the term in the context of the 1888 Message, Pastor Robert Wieland, asserts the 1888 understanding is “unique”. It is in fact, in his mind, a primary reason for the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Since one of the primary purposes of the church is to preach the gospel, (See Mark 16:15) and justification lies at the heart of the gospel, (See Acts 13:32-39) one can hardly deny this conclusion.

Thesis Statement

The stakes in this debate are very high. Either we clearly define and defend “legal justification” or we have no reason to exist as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. The Spirit of Prophecy evidence supports this conclusion. Therefore, we take the following as our thesis:

The concept of “legal justification” must have a unique biblically defined and defensible meaning or there is no reason for the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and much less the 1888 Message Study Committee.

The 1888 Messenger's Understanding

The 1888 Message Study Committee has always recognized and taught two phases of justification.

The Jones-Waggoner message recognized that there are two phases of justification: (1) forensic, or legal, made for all men, and accomplished entirely outside of us; and (2) an effective transformation of heart in those who believe, and thus a justification *by faith*.⁷

⁶ Robert J. Wieland, *The 1888 Message an Introduction*, p. 73-74, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979

⁷ Robert J. Wieland, *The 1888 Message an Introduction*, p. 74, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979

Although Pastor Wieland makes this clear statement concerning the existence of a concept of two phases of justification in the 1888 message, he provides no evidence from the original proponents of the message (A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner) for such a concept, in his book.

We may however, find strong evidence of such an understanding on the part of one of the original proponents in the 1893 General Conference Bulletin. A. T. Jones is speaking:

Verse 6: "To the praise of the glory of His grace wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved." Now what do you say to that? [Congregation: "Amen."] When did He do that? [Congregation: "Before the foundation of the world."] Precisely. "Before the foundation of the world." That answers all this idea about whether we can do anything in order to be justified or not. He did it all before we had any chance to do anything--long before we were born--long before the world was made. Don't you see that the Lord is the one that does things, in order that we may be saved and that we may have Him? ⁸

Now He has done all that and has done it freely. For how many people did He do this? [Congregation: "All."] Every soul? [Congregation: "Yes, sir."] Gave all the blessings He has to every soul in this world; He chose every soul in the world; He chose Him in Christ before the foundation of the world, predestinated him unto the adoption of children and made him accepted in the Beloved, did He not? [Congregation: "Yes."] Of course He did.⁹

In this passage A. T. Jones provides evidence that he believes in the first aspect of justification, legal justification, when he says "That answers all this idea about whether we can do anything in order to be justified or not. He [God] did it all before we had any chance to do anything—long before we were born—long before the world was made." Later in the same talk Jones provides evidence that he believes in a second aspect of justification. He continues in the same vein:

We will read other verses on that presently. The thought I am after just now is that no one can have these things and know they are his without his own consent. The Lord will not force any of these things upon a man, even though He has given them already, will He? [Congregation: "No."] This is a cooperation, you see. God pours out everything in one wondrous gift, but if a man will not have it, the Lord will not compel him to have a bit of it. Every man that will take it, it is all his own. There is where the cooperation comes in. The Lord has to have our cooperation in all things.¹⁰ {February 26, 1893 ATJ, GCDB 401.12}

Did you catch that? Initially Jones suggested that there was nothing we could do to be justified. He said "He [God] has done it all". But here he clearly indicates that there is an

⁸ A. T. Jones, 1893 *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, February 26, p. 402

⁹ A. T. Jones, 1893 *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, p. 401

¹⁰ A. T. Jones, 1893 *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, p. 401

aspect of salvation in which God has *not* “done it all”. There is something that we must do because God will not do His part “without . . . [our] consent”. Jones said “The Lord will not force any of these things upon a man”. “Cooperation” is involved. This cannot be the same aspect of salvation which he was speaking of before, unless he is irrational or confused. More evidence for this second aspect of salvation may be found later in the same sermon.

Jones has previously explained that the Lord has already “chosen us” and “accepted us” and “adopted us”. The “us” is the entire human race. Thus the only thing that can prevent us from belonging to the Lord is our “choice”.

When the man chooses to put his will on the side where God's will is, then the thing is accomplished. Then it is at a man's choice that he practically, in his own experience, becomes the Lord's indeed. Then is it not by the man's own permission in choosing the Lord's way that the man becomes the Lord's in practical experience?¹¹

Notice that A. T. Jones asserted that God has “done it all” because He loved us and wanted to do it all. Yet, He does not “force” His will upon us. We are always free to choose, and we must choose.

The Lord gave Himself for us; then when I will not let Him have me, in that very thing I count myself worth more than the price that was paid--that is, worth more than the Lord, and that is the same self that puts itself above God all the time. Oh let this mind be in us that was in Christ, who emptied Himself that God and man might again be united in one.¹²

E. J. Waggoner taught a similar understanding of the first phase of justification. He wrote:

"By the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." There is no exception here. As the condemnation came upon all, so the justification comes upon all. Christ has tasted death for every man. He has given himself for all. Nay, he has given himself to every man. The free gift has come upon all. The fact that it is a free gift is evidence that there is no exception. If it came upon only those who have some special qualification, [i.e. faith] then it would not be a free gift (Waggoner on Romans, pg. 101).

"The will of God is our sanctification. 1 Thess. 4:3. He wills that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Tim. 2:4 And He 'accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will.' Eph. 1:11. "Do you mean to teach universal salvation?" someone may ask. We mean to teach just what the Word of God teaches--

¹¹ A. T. Jones, *1893 General Conference Daily Bulletin*, February 26, 1893, p. 403

¹² A. T. Jones, *1893 General Conference Daily Bulletin*, February 26, 1893, p. 403, para. 6

that 'the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men.' Titus 2:11, RV. God has wrought out salvation for every man, and has given it to him; but the majority spurn it and throw it away. The judgment will reveal the fact that full salvation was given to every man and that the lost have deliberately thrown away their birthright possession." (Glad Tidings, pp. 13, 14).

Christ died for all men; all men were under the condemnation of the law of God; and so he was made under its condemnation. By the grace of God he tasted death for every man" [Heb. 2:9] (Waggoner, The Gospel in the Book of Galatians, pp. 29, 30).

Yes! The 1888 messengers *did* understand and teach two aspects of justification. And it is great that the Spirit of Prophecy endorsed these men more than three-hundred times. Yet, that is not the definitive answer to the question before us. Legal Justification: Is it a valid concept? The question must be answered from scripture.

The Bible Reference to "Legal Justification"

The Bible clearly speaks of a phase of justification (legal justification) which God has unilaterally accomplished for all men. And the Bible also clearly speaks of a phase of justification (justification by faith) which depends upon the response of faith. We notice the first phase as it is described in Romans chapter three.¹³

Romans chapter three concerns the state of all mankind. Verses 10 through 18 describe all mankind. "There is none righteous, no not one". Verses 19 and 20 make it clear that the passage is dealing with the entire human race and not just believing Jews and Gentiles. It says:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:19-20).

The expression "all the world" extends beyond the subset of believing Jews and Gentiles. The expression "no flesh" does the same. So the chapter is concerned with the human race and its standing before God. It explicitly states that all mankind is unrighteous and all are guilty of sin. Yet verses 23 and 24 announce the glorious good news of the gospel to all mankind, all "flesh".

Verse 23 says "all have sinned" and verse 24 says "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". Who is "justified freely by His grace"? There is

¹³ Romans 3:20-25

no subject as the object of the justification announced in verse 24. The only logical assumption that can be made is the subject of verse 24 is the same as the subject of verse 23. "All" in verse 23 refers to "all the world" (verse 20) and thus "all the world" is the subject of verse 24. And the verse can be translated

"and all are justified by the free gift of his grace . . ." (Romans 3:24, New Jerusalem Bible).

This verse refers to the first phase of justification, which has been referred to as "legal justification" by the 1888 Message Study Committee. All were justified by the death of Christ.

The Definition and Limits of "Legal Justification"

Some have accused those who believe in the two phases of justification of teaching "universalism". This accusation has surfaced again and again in part due to a failure to clearly define the scope and limitations of legal justification. We have never intended to teach that we are born saved unto eternal life but we do intend to teach that we are born saved from the curse of the law. If we were born eternally saved (i.e. justified unto eternal life) there would be no place or need for justification by faith. Therefore, we need to clearly define the limits of legal justification its relationship to justification by faith can be properly understood and its importance and significance can be clearly seen.

We have observed above that the Bible says "All are justified by the free gift of His grace . . ." (Romans 3:24, NJB). Yet we are also clear that there is second phase of justification. "We have believed in Jesus Christ that we might be justified by the faith of Christ . . ." (Galatians 2:16, KJV). Seeing that there are two phases of justification, we must clearly define the scope and limits of the first phase in order to leave room for the second. What does the Bible mean when it says "all are justified . . ." (Romans 3:24)?

Galatians 3:13 says:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree")

This is a clear statement of what Christ did for all of us at the cross. The term translated as "redeemed" is in the aorist indicative active tense in the original. Thus we understand that the redemption happened in the past. Who is the "us" who have been "redeemed"? Some might

be tempted to believe “us” refers only to believers. But later in chapter four of the same book Paul wrote:

Galatians 4:4-5 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (NKJV)

Jesus came “to redeem those who were under the law”. Who are “those who were under the law”? Does that refer only to believers? We may find a very similar expression in Romans chapter three.

Romans 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. (NKJV, emphasis supplied)

The law speaks to those who are “under the law”. How many are included as being “under the law”. The text says the law speaks “that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty.” The next verse then says “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified”. Therefore, we conclude that “all the world” or all “flesh” defines the expression “those who were under the law”. Thus everyone, was under the law. And therefore all flesh was redeemed when Christ was made a curse for us.

This defines the extent of the applicability of the justification which was established by the cross of Christ. The question is: What is the scope and meaning of legal justification which is applicable to all mankind? What does the Bible mean when it says: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law”? We shall begin by exploring what is meant by the expression “the curse of the law”. To be under the curse means to be condemned to suffer eternal death. That is what Jesus suffered in our behalf in order to deliver us from it. He “tasted death for every man”(Heb. 2:9). In other words there are only two possible options. We either stand justified unto life or condemned to eternal death. Since Jesus has “tasted death for every man” (Heb. 2:9) every human soul stands justified unto life. This is the effect of the first phase of justification which is referred to as “legal justification”.

The next question which needs to be addressed is what is meant by “justification unto life”. Some have erred by assuming that because the Bible uses the term “zoe” in Romans 5:18, the expression “justification unto life” must mean justification unto eternal life. But if everyone was already justified unto eternal life at the cross, what need would there be for a second phase of justification which is referred to as “justification by faith”? The use of the term “zoe” does not demand that we understand Romans 5:18 to refer to eternal life.

In James 4:13-14 the Bible says:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

In the original, the term for “life” in verse fourteen is “zoe”. Clearly the writer does not mean eternal life. Eternal life would never be referred to as a “vapor”.

In 1 Corinthians chapter fifteen we have a similar situation:

1 Corinthians 15:19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

Here again the term translated as “life” is “zoe” in the original. And it does not mean eternal life. The text refers to “this life”, the life which all now have, which is temporal life.¹⁴

If the Greek word “zoe” always meant “eternal life” it would be redundant for the Bible to use the qualifying term “eternal” in front of the word “zoe”. But we often find this to be the case. For example Matthew 19:16 uses the expression “eternal life”. The term translated “life” is “zoe”. But if “zoe” means “eternal life” the passage would have read “eternal eternal life”. Evidently the term “zoe” simply means “life”. We find the same situation in Matthew 25:46, Mark 10:17, Mark 10:30, Luke 10:25, Luke 18:18 and John 3:15. In a number places the term “everlasting” is used to qualify “zoe”. (See for example Matthew 19:29 or Luke 18:30) Thus a preponderance of the Biblical evidence demonstrates that the nature of “zoe” is defined by the context in which the term appears and it does not always mean “eternal life”.

¹⁴ Eternal life is not conferred until the second coming of Christ when “this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53)

It has been suggested that the context of Romans chapter five is contrasting the second death and eternal life. Thus, it is argued, since the context is dealing with eternal realities *zoe* in verse eighteen must mean eternal life. This argument over-looks the fact that verse fifteen says “For if through the offense of one many be dead . . .” speaking of the first death and not eternal death. Therefore, the passage in question does not speak *exclusively* in terms of eternal realities and there is no requirement to interpret every reference to “life” and “death” as referring to the eternal death and eternal life and hence no requirement to interpret *zoe* in verse eighteen as eternal life.

The Practical Significance of “Legal Justification”

If Romans 5:18 refers to justification unto probationary life there is no difficulty in seeing the expression “justification unto life” as referring to all mankind as the verse seems to use the term “all” to indicate. But what does this really mean and why is it important? It simply means the condemnation to eternal death, which came upon the race “in Adam”, was reversed when Jesus suffered the penalty and “redeemed us from the curse of the law”. Because Christ did that for all mankind, the Bible says He has “abolished death, and hath brought life (*zoe*) and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). Since all mankind was delivered from condemnation and the sentence of eternal death, through the death of Christ, all mankind has been legally justified unto life. That means no one is “under the law” and all mankind is “under grace” (Romans 6:15). And this further demands the conclusion that all mankind owes a debt of gratitude to God for giving His only begotten Son. Thus Paul concludes that all mankind “should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:14, 16). This is the practical significance of legal justification. Every human soul has been redeemed “from the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13). All have been redeemed from condemnation and placed under probationary grace.

If we are not already delivered from condemnation, then there is something that we must do in order to be delivered from condemnation. And since mankind is naturally self-centered, this objective would over-ride every other motivation and make genuine faith in Christ impossible. Apart from God’s initiative, the best that we can ever hope to have is a self-centered motivation, a desperate grasping for security and hoping to save ourselves. Apart

from God's initiative genuine, pure, gospel centered motivations become impossible; they are always tainted with self concern as long as we understand that we remain under condemnation until we do something that will cause the curse of the law to be removed from us. Thus we can never have lasting peace with God or enter into "the joy of salvation" as long as we believe our justification unto life depends upon something that we must do. In that system of understanding Satan will always be able to tempt us with doubt as to whether we have done enough, especially when we experience trials and difficulties. The question will always be "am I good enough", "am I pure enough", "is my faith of the required caliber to accomplish my justification"? The true plan of salvation solves this problem once and for all. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of law, being made a curse for us!" The issue is forever settled. "My faith has found a resting place." And that is certainly not in any man made creed!

Conclusion

The only way the hundred and forty-four thousands will be able to endure a "time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation" (Dan. 12:1), is to be rooted and grounded in the pure unadulterated truth of the gospel. Anything less will not be sufficient for the trial ahead. This is why, just before the national Sunday law bill was introduced in the US congress in 1888, in that same year "God sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones".¹⁵ It was a message designed to prepare a people to stand the test which was being formulated in the minds of congressmen, unconsciously inspired by Satan, even while "Christ's delegated messengers" were speaking to His people at the Minneapolis General Conference session. Because that message was not received in 1888, the church was unprepared for the test and the Sunday legislation *had* to be stopped. Later in the year 1888 (December) as the Sunday law was being debated in the US congress the servant of the Lord wrote:

The peculiar work of the third angel has not been seen in its importance. God meant that his people should be far in advance of what they are today. But now, when the time has come for them to spring into action, they have the getting ready to do.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pg. 91

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 11, 1888

The rejection of the message had left us unprepared to meet the emergency. Someday, that emergency must be met. Someday, the enemy must be allowed to bring the final test upon the world and the people of God must be prepared to meet it. Someday, God's people must come to grips with the meaning of that "most precious message"¹⁷ which was sent to us so long ago.

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pg. 91