

Universal Legal Justification in the Writings of E. J. Waggoner

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A number of notable twentieth and twenty-first century interpreters of Waggoner have claimed that he taught a doctrine of “universal legal justification.”¹ This position holds that God pardons the sinner prior to any conscious belief in Christ. In fact, its advocates claim that this understanding is one of the unique contributions of Waggoner to Christian thought and has been a leading bone of contention between them and other Waggoner interpreters. Thus a clear distinction is made between being universally, legally justified at the death of Christ and experientially justified at the moment of belief, or the conscious appropriation of the merits or justifying benefits of Christ’s atoning work.

I. *The Case Before 1888*

The simple facts are these: If this was Waggoner’s pre-1888 understanding, he did not emphasize it. I am aware of only one statement that even comes close to suggesting such a distinction between a universal legal justification of all humanity and the experiential appropriation of the merits of Christ during the conversion experience of the repentant believer: “It may be said that God does not actually forgive men until they repent. This is true; but He desired that they shall receive His pardon, and therefore, so far as He is concerned, He has pardoned them. All that is lacking is for them to accept the pardon which He offers them; if they will not, He is clear, and the responsibility of their ruin rests upon themselves.”²

It is instructive that Waggoner here affirmed the truth that “God does not actually forgive men until they repent.” He explicitly said that “this is true.” Yet, positively, what he seemed to want to communicate was not some version of “universal legal justification,” but the deep “desires” of God “that they shall receive His pardon.” Thus, in the mind of God “He has pardoned them.”

In one sense, He has forgiven us long ago, but this is not the biblical understanding of justification by faith. Normally, only an act of genuinely trusting faith can effectually appropriate the justifying merits of Christ.³ This is not just Waggoner’s consensus position, but also the overall emphasis of both Ellen White and the Bible.

Furthermore, Waggoner was explicit that justification is a personal, not a corporate, or collective, matter. Commenting on Galatians 3, he plainly declared that “there can be no Christian experience, no faith, no justification, no righteousness that is not an individual matter. People are saved as individuals, and not as nations.”⁴ Could words be plainer?

There is at least one more key point that Waggoner himself made about the issue of justification by faith. What follows is a strongly expressed concept by which Waggoner seemed effectively to preclude any possibility of universal legal justification: “It must not be forgotten that we are now speaking only of the sins that are *past*. It is impossible that *remission* of sins could have reference to anything else, for that which does not exist cannot be taken away; and to justify a man for sins not yet committed, in other words, to grant indulgence for sins, would throw contempt on the law, and bring in anarchy and ruin. And no sins are remitted except of those who believe in Jesus. If any are Christ’s, they are Abraham’s seed (Gal 3:29), and therefore, with him, their faith is imputed unto them for righteousness (James 2:23).”⁵

It just seems that if we impute the doctrine of “universal legal justification” to E. J. Waggoner, we would have Waggoner militating against Waggoner. Thus in the pre-1888 years, the support for it is slim to non-existent. In fact, we could justifiably classify the evidence against this alleged teaching of “universal legal justification” during the early years of Waggoner’s writings and the larger context of his Protestant theological

background (especially the Wesleyan tradition) as an outright rejection of this well-meant, but misplaced concept.

II. 1888-1892

In the era, immediately following the 1888 General Conference, there is no real appreciable development of his concepts. All are agreed that God provides a temporary shield against the execution of His justice, and sinners are granted time to ponder the benefits of God's great atoning work which has made full provision for salvation from the guilt of sin.

Waggoner himself made this point very clear: "If it had not been that Christ was given for man's redemption, death would have ended all for Adam, and for the human race. But the promise of a Redeemer carried with it another probation, and so the execution of the sentence was suspended until it should be seen what use men would make of that probation. God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world . . . and until that time the sentence will be held in abeyance . . . But those who reject the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God will abide on them."⁶ All Arminian, or free-will Christians are clear on this. But things get a bit more complicated when one claims that God has actually justified the whole human race, not just provided them with probationary time.

The key issue is this: Does God actually, legally bestow legal justification on all? Does he actually come and place it, as it were, in our laps? For Waggoner, it appears that in the years from before 1888 and up through 1892, the answer is no! Certainly legal justification is an offer, but unless there is a real heart embrace of the offer by genuine, living faith, we in essence "spurn" it. All that can be said for the pre-1888 thought of Waggoner applies to this era from 1888 to 1892.

Even if one accepts the metaphor that the gift has actually been placed in your mailbox or hands or lap, this still does not imply the embracing of the gift. Here is the key issue, even for the Universal Legal Justification interpreters of Waggoner: Even if it is effectively stuck in your lap or your hands, it is not savingly effectual unless there is the subsequent experience of what they call "experiential justification," or a real heart embrace of the universally bestowed gift of legal justification.

At this stage of Waggoner's expression in his writings--which is up to 1892--there is simply no evidence for the claim that God actually places the gift of legal justification in our laps and we are legally justified whether we want to be or not.

III. 1893-1903

According to the advocates of this theme, the most compelling evidence for universal legal justification in the writings of Waggoner were set forth during the period reaching from 1893 to 1903. They claim that the following published statements present the strongest evidence for their interpretation of Waggoner.

The first statement is based on an exposition of Romans 5:15-18: "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."⁷ On the face of it, the case seems quite convincing. Especially the expressions "justification comes upon all" and "to every man" seem to point to something that is universally placed in the hands or laps of "all." But this is not the full story; there is more to come.

While the "gift of righteousness and life in Christ has come to every man on earth," it is also true that "there is not the slightest reason why every man that has ever lived should not be saved unto eternal life, except that they would not have it."⁸ Thus salvation "unto eternal life" is conditional upon believers actually having it. So there is an essential, saving condition that must be experienced, if the alleged universal legal

bestowment is to prove effective for the receipt of “eternal life.” But Waggoner is not through with his exposition of the conditional qualification of salvation to “eternal life.” He promptly goes on to say that “so many spurn the gift offered so freely” and that “the free gift comes upon all, but all will not accept it, and therefore all are not made righteous by it.”⁹

The reader should carefully note the expression “spurn the gift offered so freely.” The “to every man” and the coming “upon all” means to receive an “offer” that can be “spurned.” This very definitely qualifies the apparently unconditional force of the words that seemed to suggest the “free gift” has been placed “upon all” or given “to every man.” There is a significant difference between an “offer” that can be “spurned” and something that is actually and legally bestowed into the hands or laps (as it were) of “every man on earth.” Thus the case is not nearly as self-evident as the universal legal interpreters of Waggoner allege.

Once more, in 1895, Waggoner writes in a manner quite similar to the previous article of 1894: “Jesus is the light of the world; so He is the true Light, ‘which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’ Or, as some render it, In coming into the world, He lights every man. The point is that all do have the light . . . That life-giving light has shone upon all, and is still shining.” And once more the key Romans passage is then cited: “‘By the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.’ Rom v. 18. God’s love embraces all the world, and every man in it. To all He has given ‘His unspeakable gift.’ What a sad awakening it will be at last when men realise what was within their grasp, and what they let go.”¹⁰

While this exposition has a bit more force to it in support of the argument of Waggoner’s universal legal justification interpreters, it is also not compelling. It is one thing to have light shining upon sinners and that they sense that God’s love is embracing all the world, but quite another to be actually justified. Furthermore, the expression “what was within their grasp” does not necessarily mean to actually have something for sure; it can also mean to be in a position to actually be able to receive what the light has illuminated. In other words, the tragedy is that what was in the clear realm of possibility was “let go.” To reject light is to “let go” the offer of a life-time. Thus it seems more natural to see Paul’s “justification of life” to be the offer of salvation that has been spotlighted as something that is “within the grasp” of the truly responsive believer, but is also an opportunity that can be “let go” of or neglected.

But is there any further evidence for the concept of universal legal justification? And the answer is that, in fact, there is some rather convincing evidence. But it seems to show up in some surprising and disconcerting settings.

Consider the following: At the 1897 General Conference, Waggoner presented a series of lectures on the book of Hebrews. The following concepts are quite revealing: “The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart—in thy flesh; confess this fact, and ‘thou shalt be saved.’ This teaches the presence of Christ in every soul, waiting for recognition, in order that he may save. ‘Then you would make no difference between a sinner and a Christian?’—Oh, yes, indeed; all the difference in the world, or, rather, all the difference between the world and heaven. Christ has come in the flesh,—that is in all mankind, for man is flesh (Gen vii. 3), —but while he dwells in the sinner without recognition, and is held down in unrighteousness (Rom i. 15), in the Christian He dwells ‘by faith.’ Eph iii. 19.”¹¹ Very clearly there is the “presence of Christ in every soul.” He is not just standing by offering it, but actually is in the soul.

But this concept would become even more explicit as the years after 1897 unfolded. Carefully ponder the following: “The difference, then, between the sinner and the Christian is this: that, whereas Christ is crucified and risen in every man, in the sinner He is there unrecognized and ignored, while in the Christian He dwells there by faith. Christ is crucified in the sinner, for wherever there is sin and the curse, there is Christ bearing it . . . Faith in the eternal power and Divinity of God, that are seen in all the things He has made,¹² will enable any one to grasp this mystery.”¹³

In a subsequent article in the same series, Waggoner elaborates on the issue of who are among God's children: "What a blessed thing it is that God counts even the ungodly, those who are in the bondage of sin, as His children! Wandering, prodigal sons, but still children. God has made all men 'accepted in the Beloved.' This probationary life is given us for the purpose of giving us a chance to acknowledge Him as Father, and to become sons indeed."¹⁴

In these three statements is unmistakable evidence that Waggoner definitely taught that Christ was "crucified and risen in every man" and that He is "bearing" their "sin" and that even the "ungodly" are counted as "His children" and are "accepted in the Beloved." This is far beyond an "offer" to them or the possibility of "spurning." And while it is not the same status as those who "acknowledge Him as Father, and . . . become sons indeed," they are still "His children" and are "accepted in the Beloved" (justified). So the question then arises, why the change?

The answer is actually quite simple. Beginning in 1894 and then flooding forth like a tidal rush of muddy water in 1897, Waggoner clearly evidenced pantheistic tendencies.¹⁵ In this seemingly vibrant world-view, the "eternal power and Divinity of God" are "seen in all the things He has made." Such a world-view, however, contained subtle darkness that was to ultimately lead Waggoner into the sloughs of murky and deadly deception. But in reference to our present issue, the rationale is quite simple: If the "eternal power and Divinity of God" are "in all the things He has made," then it is one easy, logical step to conclude that He dwells in the "ungodly" and thus they are viewed as "accepted in the Beloved."

Is there a doctrine of universal legal justification for the ungodly in Waggoner? Yes, there clearly is, and it appears to be the offspring of the pagan philosophy of pantheism. What then are we to make of this teaching? While the pre-pantheistic Waggoner can possibly be interpreted as teaching universal legal justification (especially after 1892), the evidence is not compelling that he did. But aside from its clear emergence in Waggoner's later pantheistic distortions, the doctrine has one other interesting down-side. The interpreters of Waggoner, who have touted this doctrine as somehow the most wonderful discovery in the history of the doctrine of salvation by faith, have unwittingly employed this allegedly glorious discovery to effectively legitimate Waggoner's numerous other theological directions. The net effect is that many do not realize the depths of the problem of the wrong directions that Waggoner's overall theology was moving towards after 1889 and especially after 1893. I know that this is not what is intended by his interpreters, but it is the unwitting net effect. I would simply suggest that the whole thrust of any real teaching of universal legal justification in the teachings of Waggoner essentially hangs on a number of false theological principles, but especially his pantheism.

So what is the sum of the matter? Universal legal justification is simply a doctrine that we can do without. The positive thrust regarding the granting of temporary forgiveness in the interest of making room for a time of probation in which sin-confused sinners can weigh their options in the face of God's calling and convicting grace has already been laid out by the vast majority of Arminian Christians, including John Wesley and the pre-1888 Ellen G. White. And while Waggoner did make some truly significant contributions to theological clarity, they all were essentially in place by 1888, not afterward. In fact, what comes afterward is, on balance, a body of theology that descends into theological confusion and error in just about every major issue he sought to highlight. And the alleged universal legal justification only stands out clearly as it was enveloped in the mists of pantheism.

¹They include Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, their leading colleagues in the 1888 Study Committee movement, and their well-known fellow traveler, Pastor Jack Sequeira. For ready documentation, see Robert J. Wieland, *The 1888 Message: An*

Introduction (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association) chapter 8, especially pages 95 to 104, and Jack Sequeira, *Beyond Belief* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1993), especially chapter 3, pages 29 to 37.

²E. J. Waggoner, "The Lord's Prayer. Forgive Us Our Debts," *The Signs of the Times*, May 5, 1887.

³I invoke the qualifier "normally" here in order to recognize two key issues: (1) the salvation of infants and little children who have not yet come to accountability; and (2) the cases of non-Christians who have not been formally evangelized, but who will be redeemed. While these issues certainly allow for the possibility of salvation, they do not deny the overall biblical emphasis that salvation is by grace, through consciously trusting in the saving merits of Christ.

⁴E. J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* (Oakland, CA: n. p., 1888), 45.

⁵E. J. Waggoner, "Justified by Faith," *The Signs of the Times*, Nov. 23, 1891.

⁶E. J. Waggoner, "The Penalty of the Law," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 16, No. 30, August 4, 1890.

⁷E. J. Waggoner, "Studies in Romans. The Free Gift. Rom. V. 12–19," *The Present Truth*, Oct. 18, 1894. The same article was republished under the very same title in the North American *Signs of the Times*, March 12, 1896. (Emphasis supplied).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰E. J. Waggoner, "The Word of Life and Light," *The Present Truth*, Nov. 21, 1895.

¹¹E. J. Waggoner, "Lessons from the Book of Hebrews. The True Confession of Faith," *The Present Truth*, Vol. 13, No. 47, November 25, 1897.

¹²Compare this with the following: "The fact that a man lives and has breath . . . is proof of the presence of God in his flesh" (E. J. Waggoner, "Studies in the Gospel of John. Words of Comfort. John xiv. 1–14," *The Present Truth*, Vol. 15, No. 14, April 13, 1899).

¹³E. J. Waggoner, "Studies in Galatians. The Ever-Present Cross. Gal 2: 17-21; 3:1," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 25, No. 3, January 18, 1899.

¹⁴E. J. Waggoner, "Studies in Galatians. The Adoption of Sons. Gal 4: 1–7," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 25, No. 10, March 8, 1899.

¹⁵The word "pantheistic," though not the most technically correct term, is the commonly used word to describe this concept; the expression "panentheistic" is the more accurate descriptor of Waggoner's troubling philosophical directions.