Universal Legal Justification and Vicarious Atonement

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Like the first-century church, Adventism has varying theories of the doctrine of salvation circulating in its midst. One theory currently in circulation is the doctrine of Universal Legal Justification [ULJ], advocated by the 1888 Study Committee and Jack Sequeira. The core of ULJ appears to be the assertion that Christ's death has actually altered the legal standing of all humans with God. ULJ asserts that all humans were forensically justified in His sight prior to any exercise of faith in Christ by the individual. Hence, justification by faith is reduced to being the subjective *realization* of one's standing with God which is already established. ULJ stands on two theological pillars: The mechanism by which Jesus bears our sins, and the doctrine of man. If either of these pillars prove faulty, the doctrine of ULJ will be undermined. ULJ is theologically complex and intricate. Hence, in the scope of this article, I can only briefly consider the first issue, how Jesus bears our sins.

How does Jesus actually bear our sins? Both the 1888 Study Committee and Jack Sequeira reject a vicarious atonement model. Vicarious atonement means a one-for-one representation, in which Christ is understood to personally represent you individually on the cross as your personal representative and substitute. Christ thus bears our sins through a transfer of sin from sinner to substitute, as seen in the symbolism of the Mosaic sanctuary. It is this model of vicarious representation – especially the concept of the transfer of sin – that is rejected by the 1888 Study Committee and Sequeira.

In a short article in the 1888 Study Committee newsletter, an unspecified author opines,

> It is interesting that the word "vicarious" appears nowhere in the Bible, nor did Ellen White use it in any of her books. The Bible does not teach vicarious substitution, but a shared substitution. There is a big difference! The former is the evangelical idea, the latter is the 1888 message idea. There has been much confusion and even misrepresentation on the part of sincere people. A clear statement of the Bible idea follows.[1]

What then follows is an excerpt from Jack Sequeira in which he asserts,

> The concept of substitutionary atonement presently taught by evangelical Christianity, as well as within Adventism, does not take us far enough in understanding the profound truth of the atonement, especially as taught by the apostle Paul. . . . Christ did not die so that in exchange we might live; rather he died as us in order that we might by faith share in His death and resurrection.[2]

Sequeira speaks of vicarious substitution as the concept of exchanged experience while "shared" or "actual" substitution teaches the concept of a shared experience between Christ and man.[3] Thus, he says Christ dies "as us" in contrast to dying for us. Elsewhere, Sequeira better explains the grounds of rejecting the vicarious model, by appealing to Roman Catholic criticism of the Reformation gospel. "As the Catholic theologians pointed out, it is a fundamental principle of all law, God's or man's, that guilt or punishment cannot be transferred from the guilty to the innocent, nor can the righteousness of one person be legally transferred to another."[4]

Sequeira is using arguments designed to overthrow the gospel preached by Luther and other Reformers with its vicarious atonement model. By contrast, Ellen White makes strong and enthusiastic remarks concerning Luther's recovery of the gospel.[5] By using Sequeira to make a fuller explanation, the 1888 Study Committee *de facto* becomes dependent on Sequeira's deeper points of argument.

While it is true that Ellen White never uses "vicarious" in any of her *books*, she does use the term in a *Review and Herald* article, and this singular use is of great significance:

> Christ came to reveal to the world the knowledge of the character of God, of which the world was destitute. This knowledge was the chief treasure which he committed to his disciples to be communicated to men. The truth of God had been hidden beneath a mass of tradition and error. *The sacrificial offerings which had been instituted to teach men concerning the vicarious atonement of Christ*, to teach them that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, had become to them a stumbling-block. All that was spiritual and holy was perverted to their darkened understanding.[6]

Notice that for Ellen White, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was designed to teach men about "the vicarious atonement of Christ." Furthermore, her affirmation of the vicarious nature of the atonement came in 1892, four years after the events of 1888 in Minneapolis. It seems odd that if the 1888 message was built on changing the central model of the atonement from vicarious representation to an alternative view, that Ellen White would still be affirming the vicarious model of atonement four years later. Perhaps she recognized that the original 1888 message advocated a vicarious model of the atonement, unlike the present self-styled practitioners of the 1888 message.

E.J. Waggoner seems to affirm the vicarious nature of the atonement in his open letter to GC President G. I. Butler, published in late 1888 shortly after the General Conference session. In his response to Butler, Waggoner argues, "Paul says that the preaching of the cross is to some people foolishness, or absurd, and I have often heard people ridicule *the idea that the death of one person could atone for the sins of another*. They call such an idea absurd, yet to you and me it is perfectly consistent with reason."[7] Notice Waggoner's use of the language of vicarious representation: "*the idea that the death of one person could atone for the sins of another*."

Waggoner's support for the vicarious model of atonement is openly demonstrated thirty pages later. Waggoner asks, "Again; why was Jesus baptized? He said that it was 'to fulfill all righteousness.' We may not say that it was simply as an example; for that would be really *denying the vicarious nature of the atonement*."[8] Waggoner is clearly concerned that Butler's position would undermine "the vicarious nature of the atonement." Why would Waggoner be so concerned about undermining the vicarious nature of atonement if his Minneapolis message was based on abandoning the vicarious model for another? This is most interesting for if Waggoner advocated vicarious atonement in 1888, how is it that his name is now associated with a rejection of the vicarious model? The answer may lie in the fact that Waggoner changed to a more pantheistic model of the atonement by 1900.

In his 1900 volume, *The Glad Tidings*, Waggoner argues that Christ bears sin continuously instead of once for all on the Cross. Waggoner comes to this conclusion by arguing that all things are under the curse, which brings death, and yet all things still live. Waggoner concludes, "Therefore, the fact that we see life everywhere . . . is positive proof that the cross of the Crucified One *is there bearing* it."[9] Later he adds, "Christ is crucified in the sinner, for wherever there is sin and the curse, *there* is Christ *bearing* it."[10] Notice that Waggoner's language is one of a present, ongoing bearing of sin by a personal presence of Christ in the sinner. In addition, the crown of thorns is asserted to represent Christ as bearing all of nature's weakness due to sin. Christ thus must be in all of nature bearing sin to keep it alive.[11] Christ bears sin primarily through a personal presence in the ontological substance of man and nature, throughout history. The pantheistic overtones of this atonement model are obvious, but come naturally when sin is treated more as an infused substance than the reining power of Romans 5-7.

Waggoner's new model of how Christ bears sins is significant. This is because it is the pantheistic Waggoner who has abandoned the vicarious model of atonement he held twelve years earlier. It is suggestive that the 1888 Study Committee, in their rejection of the vicarious model of atonement, may be patterning their doctrine from the later Waggoner while trying to sift out the pantheistic elements. It seems, however, that it was precisely Waggoner's pantheistic tendencies that caused him to abandon the vicarious model and join forces with Kellogg. Ellen White responded to Kellogg's view of Christ being in sinners and in nature by saying, "in *Living Temple* the assertion is made that God is in the flower, in the leaf, in the sinner. But God does not live in the sinner. The Word declares that He abides only in the hearts of those who love Him and do righteousness. God does not abide in the heart of the sinner; it is the enemy who abides there."[12] These comments seem equally contrary to Waggoner's pantheistic assertions in *Glad Tidings*.[13] By refuting Kellogg as being contrary to Scripture, Ellen White brings us to another question: What insights can be found in Scripture about vicarious substitution?

Christ, describing His mission, said that a man can show no greater love than to "die *for* his friends" (John 15:13). This is remarkably similar language to His earlier comment, "and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). "For" is not the conjunction *hōs* (as) but, rather, is the preposition *hyper* (for). 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 – whether one sheep or many sheep. Both friends and sheep are saved from dying by the friend or shepherd who dies for them. Hence there is a clear inference favoring a vicarious understanding of the death of Christ as a personal replacement, the one dying in place of His friend to save the friend's life.

Paul, in Romans 5:7, mirrors Christ's teaching by making an analogy of the death of Christ for us using an explicitly vicarious illustration. "Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die." Here we have a direct, one-for-one substitution being presented—a vicarious death. *One* dies *for* another *individual*. This sets up the exclamation in verse eight that Christ died *for* us while we were still His enemies. The use of "for" (*hyper*) leaves no doubt that Christ was not dying *as* us or *with* us, but *for* us, in our place, like the one who would die for the good man. Verse 7 leaves no other option than the vicarious model for how we interpret v. 8.

Having surveyed some issues centering on vicarious substitution, let us now turn our attention to the transfer of sin. We have seen that rejecting the vicarious model brings an accompanying rejection of the concept of transferring sin. What happens to the doctrine of the sanctuary if the transfer of sin is rejected as being illegal and unethical?

The sanctuary doctrine, which is well-supported biblically, is grounded in the principle of the transfer of sin from sinner to substitute.[14] For example, Ellen White explains the basic elements of the Sanctuary in terms of a transfer of sin:

> Day by day the repentant sinner brought his offering to the door of the tabernacle and, placing his hand upon the victim's head, confessed his sins, thus *in figure transferring them from himself to the innocent sacrifice*. . . . As anciently the sins of the people were by faith placed upon the sin offering and through its blood transferred, in figure, to the earthly sanctuary, so in the new covenant the sins of the repentant are by faith placed upon Christ and transferred, in fact, to the heavenly sanctuary.[15]

Elsewhere she notes: "The most important part of the daily ministration was the service performed in behalf of individuals. The repentant sinner brought his offering to the door of the tabernacle, and, placing his hand upon

the victim's head, confessed his sins, thus in figure *transferring them from himself to the innocent sacrifice*."[16] She also applies the concept of the transfer of sin to the Lord's goat on the Day of Atonement.[17] Ellen White applies the transfer model to our sins and Christ: "The Lord imputes unto the believer the righteousness of Christ and pronounces him righteous before the universe. *He transfers his sins to Jesus*, the sinner's representative, substitute, and surety. Upon Christ He lays the iniquity of every soul that believeth. 'He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor 5:21)."[18] By contrast, it is argued by Sequeira and the 1888 Study Committee that such transferral is illegal and unethical.[19] It thus seems that to deny the transfer of sin is to squarely contradict the early SDA sanctuary doctrine, especially as articulated by Ellen White. Without the transfer of sin in a vicarious representation model, the sanctuary doctrine which launched the SDA Church cannot remain a viable belief. It must either undergo significant modification[20] or be discarded. The jugular vein of ULJ is the rejection of the vicarious model of atonement and the corresponding teaching of the transfer of sin from sinner to substitute. ULJ then, is at bottom, an argument attempting to reinterpret how Jesus bears our sins and is an attempt to replace the transfer mechanism and vicarious model of atonement with an alternative mechanism for bearing sin and an alternate atonement model.[21]

It seems clear that the rejection of the vicarious atonement model raises perplexing challenges to the perspectives of both Scripture and Ellen White. Christ and Paul both use vicarious models to explain substitution, while Ellen White asserted that the Old Testament sanctuary service was intended to teach the vicarious model of atonement. The first pillar upon which ULJ is dependent appears to have some serious structural deficiencies that require further investigation.

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[1] Anonymous, "Glad Tidings," *1888 Study Committee Newsletter* (May-August, 1999), 2.

[2] Jack Sequeira, *Saviour of the World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1996), 134-135.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Jack Sequeira, *Beyond Belief* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1993), 40. The arguments on pp. 39-40 are heavily dependent on Catholic criticisms of the Reformation gospel as being unethical. The whole chapter is devoted to disproving a vicarious model of atonement in order to replace it with the corporate model, which is the basis of the doctrine of ULJ. Sequeira cites Deut 24:16 and Ezek 18:1-20 without any exposition. We cannot here address the exegesis of these texts. See idem, *Saviour of the World*, 84, for a similar assertion against vicarious representation, but without reference to Catholic theology.

[5] For example, GC 157; *ST* June 21, 1883; EW 224-225; COL 78.

[6] *RH* November 1, 1892 (emphasis supplied).

[7] Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* (Oakland, Calif.: n.p., 1888), 17.

[8] Waggoner, *Galatians*, 47.

[9] Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1900), 85 (emphasis supplied). The full argument is found on pp. 84-91.

[10] Ibid., 89 (emphasis supplied).

[11] Ibid., 85.

[12] White, 1SAT 343.

[13] On Waggoner's transition in his view of the atonement, see Woodrow Whidden, "Universal Legal Justification in the Writings of E. J. Waggoner," *Reflections*, no. 22 (April 2008): 6-9. I have not researched the exact timeline of this development, but have merely observed the significant difference in the contrasting positions published by one man twelve years apart. The significance is in the differing positions, not in examining the process of how rapidly such a change occurred.

[14] See the seven volumes produced by the Daniel and Revelation Committee, published by BRI.

[15] GC 418, 421.

[16] PP 354 (emphasis supplied).

[17] PP 354; GC 420.

[18] 1SM 392 (emphasis supplied). Interestingly, Ellen White ties this individualized, in-the-present declaration of justification to 2 Cor 5:21. While the next sentence affirms that "Christ made satisfaction for the guilt of the whole world," she goes on to

indicate that justification and salvation are conditioned on the sinner's faith response: "Although as sinners we are under the condemnation of the law, yet Christ by His obedience rendered to the law, claims for the repentant soul the merit of His own righteousness. *In order to obtain* the righteousness of Christ, *it is necessary* for the sinner to know what that repentance is which works a radical change of mind and spirit and action." Two paragraphs later she adds "Christ pardons *none but the penitent*, but whom He pardons He first makes penitent. The *provision* made is complete, and *the eternal righteousness of Christ is placed to the account of every believing soul*. The costly, spotless robe, woven in the loom of heaven, has been *provided for the repenting, believing sinner*" (ibid., 393-394, emphasis supplied). It thus seems abundantly clear that for Ellen White justification is not something that happens in the past, but rather occurs at the present time when a sinner believes in Jesus.

[19] Sequeira, *Beyond Belief*, 39-40; idem, *Saviour*, 84.

[20] See, e.g., Jack Sequeira, *God's Show and Tell: The Plan of Redemption in the Sanctuary* (no publishing data given), 5-7. Sequeira applies the sanctuary typology to Christ himself. Christ does not minister *in* a sanctuary in heaven. He is the sanctuary who is in heaven. Any concept of fulfillment in a building in heaven is rejected. This seems quite contrary to Heb 9-11 and to Ellen White's views in EW 42, 252, 254; Ev 222; GW 22, 26; GC 420-422, 429.

[21] Heb 4:2 declares that the "gospel" was preached to the ancient Israelites but did them no good as it was not "mixed" with a response of faith. How was the gospel preached to them? Heb 8-10 makes a solid case that the concepts of the gospel were conveyed in symbols and types. The author of Hebrews frames the argument that since certain things happened in the earthly type, we know that certain things must happen in the antitypical ministry of Christ (Heb 9:13-14, 23). The fundamentals of the gospel are depicted in the sanctuary and Paul asserts that salvation by faith is indeed an Old Testament doctrine (2 Tim 3:15).

A Reply to Jack Sequeira's Response to "Universal Legal Justification and Vicarious Atonement."
Stephen Bauer

Jack Sequeira has submitted a response to my article in the October 2008 BRI Newsletter, on Universal Legal Justification and its rejection of the vicarious model of Atonement. He claims that "Bauer has failed to realize the real reason why I oppose vicarious atonement in my books and therefore has misrepresented me." However, I did not address the rationale of Sequeira in rejecting vicarious atonement in any detail. I merely reported his position that the vicarious model is both illegal and unethical and showed that a denial of the transfer of sin undermines the interpretation of the sanctuary that founded the Adventist Church.

In his response, Sequeira moves to discuss the definition of "vicarious" and seems to argue that he actually believes in the concept of Christ dying "for us" and "in our place," yet he opens his response by affirming that he seeks to "oppose vicarious atonement" in his books. Note that for him vicarious substitution is not held in "partial contrast" but "in complete contrast" to the "in Christ" view. Such verbiage leaves the conscientious reader with the impression, not that Sequeira is trying to redeem the vicarious model to a proper usage, but, rather, that he fully opposes the concept. If Sequeira wants us to understand him to be rehabilitating and not rejecting the vicarious substitution model, then his mega-argument, which holds vicarious substitution in opposition to actual substitution, subverts this intention.

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