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Salvation by Works: The Naturalistic Approach

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As Christians, we make a big deal out of the fact that salvation is not based on works, but on faith in Jesus Christ alone. But what does that really mean? How do we distinguish between salvation by faith and salvation by works?

To get at that question, we have to first understand what we mean by salvation. Christians know, of course, what we mean by the word when we use it in a Christian context, but to understand the meaning of salvation in a generic sense requires that we have a broader understanding. The reason for that is that EVERY worldview (and every belief system within every worldview) has its own way of defining salvation. The most important implication regarding that for Christians is that when we share with a person how they can obtain Christian salvation, we want to make sure they understand what we are talking about. We have to make sure that they don't confuse or conflate their understanding of salvation (based on their own religious beliefs) with the meaning of salvation as defined by the Bible. We must begin, therefore, by defining salvation based on a worldview paradigm.

Salvation, in the broadest sense, is defined as the ultimate one can accomplish in this life. Every belief system has its own understanding of what that is. In Christian Theism, salvation is entry into a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. In Naturalism, though (every form of it), it has an entirely different focus. For Naturalists, salvation is to get the most that is possible out of this life. For them, this life is all there is.

As you can see, when we talk about salvation to a Naturalist, they are thinking something entirely different from what Christians think. They don't believe in God, so the very idea of faith in God is a meaningless concept to them. On the other hand, they believe that the natural universe, operating by natural laws, is all that exists. Thus, the ultimate for them that is even possible is confined to things that can be attained in this life.

Naturalistic Salvation Definition

Let's look a little more deeply into Naturalism's view of salvation. To begin with, Naturalism is completely atheistic. Naturalists do not believe in God or in any non-physical transcendent reality. Thus, the ultimate a person can conceivably get from this life is restricted to what they can achieve as they live life in the natural universe. And since there is considered to be no transcendent reality, there is also no basis for making objective decisions related to things that cannot be dealt with based on natural laws. All of those kinds of decisions must be based purely on personal preference and personal desires.

Naturalistic Salvation Implications

With that as a bottom line starting point, there are a couple of VERY important implications that emerge. These implications, then, form the basis for not only how Naturalists live their lives individually, but also how they structure society.

First, as it relates to morality, there is no other possibility but that it be created by human beings based on a relativistic foundation. We have already noted that there is no basis for making any kind of objective decisions related to things that cannot be dealt with

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based on natural laws. The reason for that is that an objective basis for morality would require some kind of transcendent objective moral law giver – God, in other words. And since they dismiss the very notion of God out of hand, there is no other choice but for human beings to make up their own moral rules. Where problems emerge are in the places where various individuals or groups might disagree concerning what to deem moral and immoral. In those cases, since there can be no authoritative arbiter, the ones who get to decide are those who are able to win a power struggle. We are left only with the Law of the Jungle.

The second practical implication of naturalistic salvation relates to the structuring of society. Since all of reality is considered to have emerged based on the natural laws of the universe, that can only mean that somehow life itself emerged from abiogenesis (out of nonliving matter) and naturally evolved as the life forms that now exist on earth. This makes man nothing more than one animal creature among many. And, since they believe there could be no possible transcendent meaning for human life, it also makes the ultimate value, for all living things, to be life itself. Since survival, then, becomes the ultimate value, a collectivist approach to survival naturally emerges as the optimum way to organize society. After all, we are all in this together. To put this in political terms, the use of collectivist political forms (such as socialism or communism) are deemed to provide humanity with the best path to ultimate survival.

What Does Naturalistic Salvation Look like Practically?

What we have examined so far is the philosophical underpinning of naturalistic salvation. But there are also very specific, real world ex-

pressions that we must deal with as we live life. Here are some of the natural expressions of naturalistic salvation.

Politics - If no objective moral boundaries or fixed rules exist, then the creation of societal laws and rules have no other possible source than the beliefs and preferences of the people who create them for society. And without some objective right and wrong way to create and implement those rules, brute power becomes the only means by which they are able to come about. With that foundation, totalitarianism, in some form, is inevitable.

Sexual Morality - Since there is no such thing as objective morality, nothing is inherently immoral. Thus, sexual morality becomes what the powerful in society decide to permit.

Business - Without an objective moral foundation, businesses are legitimately able to employ any means and practices that they can manage to get permission to use. With Naturalism, there is no such thing as objective ethical practices. Thus you end up with an "ends justifies the means" approach to doing business, with powerful individuals getting to determine for themselves both desired ends and means.

Religion - Religion that does not recognize an objective foundation will necessarily be focused on results in this world, with little or no concern for eternity. This kind of religious focus is very prominent in churches and denominations that adhere to some form of liberal theology. We see this played out in modern society, particularly with a focus on social justice.

Entertainment - With no objective basis for morality, there can be no objective limits on what can be considered legitimate entertainment. This would include the use of language, sexuality, and violence. Of course, there are

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always limits in any given society, but the limits are not based on anything being considered inherently right or wrong. Rather, it is based on the beliefs and preferences of those who have the power to make those decisions.

Science - When there is no objective morality, there are essentially no limits to what can be attempted using science. Of course, just as with entertainment, every society will determine some kind of limits, but none of them relate to the notion of inherent morality – since nothing is inherently immoral. For instance, if society deems it okay, things such as human genetic engineering and human cloning would be perfectly acceptable as long as they don't threaten the survival of the species.

Education - One of the main purposes of education has to do with the socialization of people in society. Every approach to educating the next generation obviously involves passing on to them what society considers to be proper beliefs and behavior. However, without any objective means for determining what is "proper," society has to make up for itself what those rules should be. Ultimately, the result ends up being the beliefs and preferences of those powerful enough in society to influence those decisions.

Media - Traditionally, the news media has been thought of as an institution that

searches out the truth and reports it to the public. That traditional approach was based on a belief that there is such a thing as objective truth, and that truth telling is morally right. Based on naturalistic beliefs, however, no such thing as objective truth is acknowledged to exist. With that foundation, the basis for reporting the news must come from a different place – and that different place is the personal beliefs and values of those who control the various media outlets. And with no objective moral standard, it also becomes okay to lie in order to promote a particular political agenda if that is deemed to be helpful to those in power.

Family - The traditional family structure has been the norm in American life since its founding. That approach has been reinforced based on a biblical understanding of the proper

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structure of society. However, with the belief that objective morality does not exist, there is no objective reason why non-traditional approaches to structuring a family cannot be implemented. As such, polygamy, polyandry, homosexual relationships, and virtually any other grouping one can imagine, can become acceptable family units if it can be permitted by those who hold the reins of power in society.

Naturalistic Salvation's Sad Result

As should be clear at this point, the most basic difference between a naturalistic and Christian understanding of salvation has to do not only with how to define it, but also its origin. Christianity understands there to be an objectively real God who has revealed Himself and His ways in an objectively real revelation. Naturalism, on the other hand, believes there is no such thing as God or any kind of transcendent reality. For them, the ultimate that can be achieved in this life must be defined by humanity – because there is no other possibility.

The end result of a naturalistic approach is that there is no such thing as actual truth. All that exists is power. And the ones who are able to exert power in society are the ones who get to impose their understanding of salvation on everyone else. Thus, salvation in Naturalism results in those with power getting what they want out of life, while everyone else must live by the dictates of those who hold power. Naturalistic salvation is not actually true, of course, but that is the way Naturalists see it, and what they attempt to impose on everyone else.