

**“The Kind of Salvation Man Needs”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. John H. Dietrich**  
**Presented and Amended**  
**by**  
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Through all the ages of history, humanity has recognized the evils of the outer world and the temptations of the inner world. It has also had a sense of the possibility of a happy life free from these temptations and of a pleasant world free from evil, with the result that the one universal cry of the human heart has been, “What shall I do to be saved?” And those who have given a more or less definite answer to this cry have been held as saviors by great masses of their fellow human beings. In fact, religion has its origin in this question, and all the religions the world has ever known have been nothing more nor less than a struggle of the individual for salvation from the evils of the world.

According to Christianity, for example, the world was created out of nothing 6,000 years ago by the simple command of God and was made fair and beautiful. Then humanity was created and was also made perfect in every part. No sooner, however, was the work of God completed than Satan appeared upon the scene. Through his wiles, Adam and his wife were tempted into fatal sin, and with their act entered into the world all the wickedness and suffering that humanity has had to bear from that day and to this. Adam’s sin became a part of the inheritance of all future generations. Every man, woman, and child, by the fact of their human nature, were the vilest of sinners in the sight of God, and therefore under his utter condemnation.

And from this line of reasoning there slowly grew up the conception of hell and eternal punishment for the wicked—the most hideous doctrine, I venture to assert, that ever defamed the human intellect or corrupted the human heart. But God cannot allow all people for all time to perish in this horrible fashion; for to permit this would be to confess that he was not so powerful as Satan, and that Satan had destroyed his handiwork. Thus, in mere justification of himself, God sends into the world his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, who suffers in humanity’s stead for its sins. The way of salvation is now open by the sacrificial sufferings of Christ and the debt is paid, God’s anger against humanity is appeased and his justice recognized. Humanity, therefore, has only to accept the atonement of Christ and to believe in him in order to be saved from all the penalties of sin. Salvation does not depend upon one’s knowledge or character, but upon faith. One might be wise or ignorant, one might be good or bad; but only if one has faith in Christ and his atonement can one be numbered among the Saints of heaven.

I need not waste any time this morning showing an audience like this the purely legendary character of this whole narrative in the *Book of Genesis*. We know today, as a result of our biblical criticism as well as our knowledge of the doctrine of evolution, that the story of Adam and Eve is not to be classed with the sober facts of history, but with the great mass of Greek myth and Roman legend and Arabian fairy tale, which is ingenious and beautiful, but which no one outside of a kindergarten thinks for a moment of accepting it as true.

If the first man never sinned, then there is no sin for his descendants to inherit; and if human nature is not totally depraved, then there is no need of God sending into the world his only begotten son that through him the world might be saved. The fact of the matter is that with the fall of the Adam and Eve story, all the rest of the conceptions that make up this great scheme of Christian salvation fall one after another, like dominoes. Not that we should regret the destruction of this ancient theology, for it means the end of a dogma that is not only irrational, but immoral, and the emancipation of life from the most hideous interpretation of its experience that the world has ever seen.

Let us turn then to the theory of salvation held by the opposite type of religion, which we call *humanism*. Firstly, according to humanism, humanity was not created a few thousand years ago in a perfect state but came into existence and reached its present stage of life by a long and gradual process of development from lower forms of existence. In other words, millions of years ago humanity was simply one of the numerous species of animals that then populated the earth, a mere animal creature struggling with all the other creatures for survival. Slowly, however, humanity began to rise and, little by little, to differentiate itself from the other animals. It developed a brain, which proved to be a more powerful factor in the struggle for existence than the strength and skill of the body. It developed emotions of sympathy and love, and human society, with all its advantages for defense against the world, came into existence. It developed a conscience that urged it to do things which contributed to the elevation of life. Thus, it slowly developed to its present stage of civilization; so that today it is a being with many of the qualities we associate with humanity, but also with many remnants of its animal nature.

As for sin, the humanist says, “If a person sins it is not because one is depraved, it is because one is not yet wholly a human.” If an individual had reached the highest ideal of humanity—that is, if one had succeeded in breaking free from all the instincts and passions of the animal, and in placing one’s whole life under the power of reason and affection—then there would be no sin. But this is not the case. We all have those high qualities of mind and heart and conscience we think of as human; but, along with these, we have many of the impulses and passions of the animal. And if people are today selfish and violent and cruel, it is only because these are the remains of previous stages of our existence. In other words, sin means that humanity is still in the process of transition from the animal to the ideal human being; and just as humanity inherited from the animals its physical frame, so also it inherited many of their cruel passions.

Instead of the conception that humanity is totally depraved and requires the miraculous intervention of a divine Redeemer, humanity achieves its own salvation by fully developing all the human tendencies there are within us all. Humanism knows nothing of sin as a natural inheritance; It knows only sin as acts that may be committed during the years of one’s life as a result of ignorance or weakness. One needs to be saved not from the consequences of the sin that Adam committed yesterday, but from the consequences of the sins that one is committing today. One needs to be saved, not from the devil but from oneself, not from the terrors of the next World but from the temptations of this. And the only salvation from these things is education and character.

It should be evident by this time that humanism does not associate the word *saved* with life after death. Humanism deals very distinctly with life as we know it here and now. And to be saved, according to humanism, is to fulfill the best that is in us and not the worst; To climb slowly to the highest and not fall swiftly to the lowest; to rise up and up and ever up from the unworthy things of the past toward the ideal of perfect truth, perfect justice, perfect goodwill. To be lost is simply to be imperfect and incomplete, to fall short of the highest possibilities of our natures. To be saved is to escape from the imperfect and incomplete and to attain unto the highest and best that is within the grasp of human life.

Thus, humanism does not talk about the salvation of the soul, but the salvation of mankind. It does not recognize any soul that we carry around with us like a piece of property, which insures us against the fires of the future. It recognizes no division in human nature. Human nature is one, and what we speak of as body, mind, and spirit are only different forms of the manifestation of this one conscious life that we call humanity; And the salvation that is needed, therefore, is not a salvation of the soul; It is a salvation of the body, a salvation of the mind, a salvation of the spirit; It is a salvation of the whole person, which must be regarded as a unit. Therefore, humanism extends the scope of salvation to the whole person rather than only a part.

Here’s another distinction; Christianity has been engaged not only in saving souls, but in saving individual souls. Each person was taught that the important thing was to save one’s own soul. But humanism teaches a doctrine that in philosophical language is called the “solidarity of humanity”—that is the doctrine that not only the individual is a unit but that humanity as a whole is a unit. Just as the human body is composed of a very complex organization of individual cells, so is humanity made-up of a very complex organization of individual men and women, and the health and vitality of the one is dependent entirely upon the health and vitality of the other. Every individual man and woman is an organic part of the human race, just as every leaf on a tree is an essential part of the tree; and there is no more chance of saving myself and yourself while we leave the rest of humanity to go to the devil than there is of saving an individual leaf on a tree that has been struck by a blight. Humanity is a unit. We must go up or down together, be lost or saved together.

And so humanism insists that no one can be saved alone. One is not saved who gains for oneself a position of security only to leave behind and abandon to their fate the great majority of others. Moreover, humanism believes that humanity cannot be saved as individuals apart from the conditions of the environment in which they live. We cannot punish crimes of poverty without also addressing their causes, and without lifting every person to a sufficient standard of living. We must change their gutters into playgrounds, their tenement homes and tent cities into houses and neighborhoods of light and joy, and their unwholesome food into abundant nourishment; and to accomplish this we need not erect mission houses, rescue stations, or more jails to get rid of the beggars, addicts, and homeless in our neighborhoods and on our streets. We need to wipe out the curses of poverty and need.

And so, humanism takes up the fight, not against heresy and nonconformity, but against poverty, poor wages and benefits, indecent living conditions, rotten politics, selfish business, inequitable

taxation, and war. It concerns itself not so much with the petty wrongdoing of the individual as with the miserable social environment that has made the individual what one is. Christianity regarded the world as a sinking ship that was doomed and from which they should save as many passengers as possible before the hulk went down; but humanism would save all the passengers by standing by the ship and making her seaworthy.

And how is this salvation affected? Humanism teaches that humanity needs to be saved above all from ignorance. Therefore, the one great savior of the world is education. But when I speak of education, I do not mean the simple imparting of information to people, the storing of their minds with facts, and teaching them correct theories about themselves and the world. This, of course, is part of education; but what humanity really needs is education in the sense that all its faculties and powers be developed to their utmost capacity. Just as we have learned to hasten the natural processes of life in cultivating fruit trees and livestock, for instance, the same intelligence, the same choice, the same purpose, need to be applied to human development; And if the world would only turn all its thought, its enthusiasm, its resources, in this direction, results might be attained in a hundred years that will take millennia to reach if we leave things to what we call the natural order of events.

The thing that humanity needs in addition to knowledge in order to be saved is moral character, that which will enable us, in the face of temptations and convenience, to do what is understood to be right. The majority of those who do evil are not morally corrupt, they are merely short-sighted. They have not had impressed upon them the inevitable consequences of their wrongdoing. They choose what seems to be a temporary advantage without regard for the final results. They must be indelibly impressed with the idea of cause and effect in the moral sphere as well as in the physical, and then they will have a real and immediate reason for being good. They must know that actions and results are bound together by an unbreakable chain of cause and effect. They must know that there is no escape from the bad consequences of a bad action, and that neither prayers nor repentance nor forgiveness nor faith in Jesus Christ or anyone else can wash out the results of their wrongdoing—one can be atoned only by good actions that may begin to compensate for and outweigh the wrongs one has previously committed.

Who, then, are the saviors of humanity? Christianity has but one savior—the son of God, who suffered and died to atone for the sins of all; but humanism has many saviors, for every man and woman who helps to do the work necessary for humanity’s salvation is a savior. The great army of truth-seekers in the world—those who patiently and persistently are helping humanity to better understand the universe are saviors. Studying the stars, reading the records of the rocks, tracing back the record of the life of humankind and finding out the laws of human development, tracing the dim and distant past that humanity has trod, studying the experiments it has tried in the past—this great army of truth-seekers, I say, are first and foremost in this grand work of universal salvation. And there is the army of reformers—those individuals who are attempting to adjust the relations between rich and poor, between labor and capital, between races and nations and religious sects, who are attempting to bring about a mutual understanding on the part of the alienated groups of society. They are also our saviors.

And there are the discoverers and inventors of the world—those who are studying the laws of nature and making them the servants of humankind. Many of the purely physical discoveries of the world bear a closer relation to the religious life and to the welfare of humanity than do most of the great religions of the past. Electricity and communication technology, as they have been applied to humanity’s use, are doing more to bring about a sense of human solidarity, to help people understand the relations that exist between them and all parts of the globe than all the prayers and all the preaching and all the churches of the last 1,900 years. Those who are seeking to regulate the sanitary life of our cities, to give the poor and downtrodden an opportunity, according to the laws of health and decency—are doing more than hundreds of those who simply preach and pray, in the work of lifting up and saving humanity from the only evils that truly assail it.

And then there are the great army of witnesses for righteousness and truth—the sufferers and martyrs, those who have some insight into the principles of righteousness and have stood for them in the face of mobs and angry crowds; Who have stood for liberty, who have stood for justice, who has stood for the rights of the downtrodden—those who have dared to stand in the face of death while the flames were kindling about them or stretched on instruments of torture, have dared to die rather than yield—such are those who are bringing about the salvation of the world.

And in this sense every man and woman living today may become a savior insofar as they devote their lives to that which makes for the welfare of humanity. Be faithful and true in every respect. Stand by the principles of right as you see them. Be honest and fearless. See what you can of the true, and the beautiful, and the good, and stand for those things fearing neither what the crowd may think nor what the crowd may do. For the person is a savior who, fearing neither the hatred of others for one’s persistence, nor being induced to desert their ranks by the blandishments and flatteries of the world, follow truth and justice withersoever they lead.

To sum up in a word; Humanity does not need atonement in the sense that it must be brought into reconciliation with God, because humanity has never been separated from God. The God of humanism is simply the life spirit that animates all things. Humanity, with all its evil as well as its good, is a natural product of that spirit. Humankind has come up from the animal world and therefore began its life in ignorance and passion. Insofar as we have gained knowledge of the conditions of human life and have been able to throw off the selfish instincts of animal life; in just so far have we been saved. And we will approach complete salvation just as quickly as we acquire complete knowledge of the universal laws that control the conditions of life. And all who help in this work are our saviors.