

## Getting Well/Better

Robert W. Bertram

[A first attempt at a position paper for the course “Christianity and Healing” for Lutheran School of Theology, Easter Term, 2001. (Editor’s note: RWB was working on this up until his death, intending to expand and refine it.)]

ALL TEN LEPERS GOT BETTER,  
ONE OF THEM EVEN GOT WELL

(Luke 17: 11-19)

"Christianity and Healing" always involves a three-way stretch: a) Jesus stretches our concept of healing, b) thereby he deepens our grief over lesser healings, c) still, more than ever, he redoubles our resolve to heal anyway, any way, even halfway.

- 1) First, the one leper is so "healed" that some translators prefer the word "saved." Either way, his healing climaxes in a rave review from God. But wasn't he healed bodily? Exactly: so bodily in fact that his very suffering—his disease, his stigma, his utter dependence--itself becomes a healing and so is "saved" from going to waste.
- 2) Second, not all Jesus' patients are that saved, so not really healed either. Most of them he merely makes better, not well--not whole. All ten lepers were cleansed of their disease but nine of these did not go on to be healed. To Jesus these were losses, disappointments. To us too? Or do we, in denial, settle for their stunted "healing"?
- 3) Third, disappointing as Jesus' heal-rate was, he still treated all ten of the lepers. Though he lost nine, not for a moment does he begrudge the help he did give them even if it was only temporary, only symptomatic, only medically successful. Would he do it all again? Indeed he would, as to this day he does through his church in the world.
- 4) Remember this three-way stretch. a) Being healed means no less than being saved, and vice versa. b) Then making patients better is not yet making them well, alas. c) Even so, at least help make them better, by all available means.
- 5) The opposite is shrink-think, three ways. a) Think salvation is not bodily, not yet. b) Or think that genuine healing can occur without dying and rising with Christ. c) Or think that b, since it is at best pre-healing and secular and deceptive, ought not be engaged in by the church. All three thoughts are illusory. They all shrink Christ.
- 6) Think of each stretch-point as an answer to a question. a) How big a healing are we talking about? b) How honestly dare we deplore, as Jesus did, the losses? c) Despite the losses, no

matter how hopeless, do we keep on "healing" them too in whatever way possible? In short: How ambitious the healing? How truthful? How undeterred?

7) The three stretch-points are really about stretching us, spiritually. It is we, whether as healers or as patients, who are being stretched between so high a view of healing, on one hand, and such deep disillusion on the other, and yet, still farther, an unrelenting commitment to healing at all costs. We are stretched quite cruciformly.

8) This cruciform spirituality of healing is itself a symptom, the stigmata, of our being healed/saved, thanks to that One on whose cross his healed believers are spread. Consequently, a Christian spirituality of healing is inseparable from a Christian theology/christology of healing. Witness the case study of the ten lepers.

Stretch-Point # One. Being healed means no less than being saved, and vice versa.

A. If "healed" means as much as "saved," what does "saved" mean?

1) First, permit a disclaimer about our definition of "healing," especially when used with that other ambiguous word, "faith." Christians have no monopoly on those terms. After all we borrowed them from the "world's" vernacular. Yet we dare to pour new wine, new meaning into those old wineskins. See how far they can stretch.

2) In this story only one of the lepers is declared "healed," "saved." What does he have that the other nine don't? Or if they all begin with the same healing but nine of them subsequently lose it, what is it they lose and he keeps? It cannot be only that he is "cleansed" of his disease. So are they.

2a) Then is that unimportant, that medical phase of his cure? By no means. If that had not come first, neither would the rest of his "salvation" which follows upon it. But why does his "cleansing," which at first is the same as the others', progress into fullblown "healing"/"salvation," while the other nine stop short with just a medical cure?

3) Is it that his cure was more than dermatological, also psycho-social? But so was the others'. They too are reinstated in the community. Well, then, we say, peeking ahead at the punchline, what distinguishes the tenth leper must be that he has "faith." True, but so did the nine, a kind of faith. Hadn't they too cast themselves on Jesus' "mercy"?

4) So, what distinguishes the tenth leper's cure as healing/saving is not that he was, say, more "holistically" involved, if that means that more of him was involved--his whole body-mind-spirit rather than just part of him. No. The question is, Who else was involved--besides him? His faith was only as healing as the one he had faith in.

5) Else it wasn't real healing. The "faith" of the other nine satisfies what many today call faith, even healing faith. But that is a circular definition of faith: then healing faith is any faith that "heals." That still begs the question, What is "heals"? Merely making patients better? If that is all, that is a far cry from the Christian sense of "saved."

6) For the nine, their "faith" in Jesus might have functioned as a placebo. Whatever works. But works on what? Why, works on leprosy, or on lepers. Is that all? How about working on God? That is the question in Luke 17. What Jesus calls faith asks not only about its medical, psychosomatic effects but about its effect, above all, upon God.

6a) Suppose that at first the faith of all the lepers was, as Luther thought, not just a placebo but genuine faith in God through Jesus, and that that is why any were cleansed at all. But then why didn't nine of the ten go on to be fully "healed"/"saved"? Because, as Luther imagined, their faith caved in to the priests and ceased to be faith in Christ.

6b) Either way, whether their "faith-healing" was a placebo form of self-help or was solely Christ's help, in the end it still falls short and fails to please Jesus the way the faith of the tenth leper does. For the same reason, whatever that reason was, the nine lepers do not rate the verdict, "healed" or "saved," as the tenth leper does.

B) Is Jesus God-talking?

7) Recall our question, If "healed" means "saved" what does "saved" mean? "Saved" is God-talk, right? Aren't those who are saved those who are dear to God? And if in the case of the one leper his being saved is credited to his faith, then our question comes down to this, What is it about his faith, unlike the others', that endears him to God?

8) Of course God would have to be the judge of that, not we, not even the patient. Look who determined that the leper was well. Not the priests, not the leper. True, he did show symptoms of recovery which anyone could observe. Yet it took Jesus to tell that these were symptomatic of being truly healed/saved. Was that God-talking? H-m-m.

9) Even if the leper himself had seen how healed he was, he definitely did not attribute his healing to his faith. Believers never do, or can. Never in Scripture does a believer look in a mirror and exclaim, Oh self, great is your faith, your faith has saved you. When "faith-healing" turns inward, it becomes faith in faith itself, fideism.

10) Biblically, only God can count believers' faith to them for righteousness and life. (Gn. 15:6) That figures, for who knows better than God whether God personally finds this or that believer pleasing? But if so, who was Jesus to think that he could spot just this believer as special to God, therefore saved? Good question.

11) In any case Jesus' verdict, right or wrong, is all the leper had to assure him he was healed, saved. If right, that is his healing. This lone rabbi's approval of him is God's approval, his

salvation. Or it is not. If Jesus is wrong, then the clean bill of health he gives the leper, no matter how hard the leper believes it, leaves the leper unhealed.

12) In short, all the leper has is Jesus' Word for it. Conversely, his "having" that Word is what faith is. Unless the Word is had, trusted, hung onto, grasped, it is useless, unsaving. Jesus could speak that Word till he is blue in the face and, no matter how true it may be abstractly, if the leper did not believe it, Jesus' Word would not come true.

13) Jesus' ringing approval is what the other nine lepers do not have. Not from God either? No, unless Jesus is wrong. What the nine do get from Jesus is the opposite: criticism. From God, too? Then they are still unwell. Does that matter? After all, they did get better medically, and the priests concurred. But Jesus did not concur. Did God?

14) Is that a theological question or a medical question? I'd say, Yes. Really, can we separate the two if the patient is truly healed only when she is saved and if she is saved/healed only when she has Jesus' word for it? The temptation is to shrug and sigh, Who is to say? That, too, is a good question. Who is to say? Let us see.

### C. Shouldn't We Be God-Talking?

15) Since Jesus is no longer present the way he once was, who now can say in his place, "Your faith has healed [or saved] you"? What an intimidating responsibility that person bears, or that community, who dares to speak that verdict for Christ--for God, really--to this leper and not that one.

16) No wonder almost no one in the church today dares to tell the sick, "Rise, go home, your faith has healed you," and the few who do dare, are questionable. Some churches even forbid it. For what if the verdict isn't true, or doesn't come true? True, how? Medically? But then how true is it theologically? If not healed, then saved?

17) Oh yes, we hasten to assure: Saved, of course, but just not healed, not yet. We even add adverbs: Saved "spiritually" but not healed "bodily." "Saved," we alibi, means only "in the sight of God." So "healed" must then mean "in the sight of humans", like doctors --to whom we're only too glad to pass the buck of declaring people healed, or not.

18) Frankly, that is a cop-out, a shrunken notion of salvation. As if anyone could be saved in a Christian sense without simultaneously being or beginning to be healed quite bodily. To so split "saved" from "healed" we have to split spirit from body, split "in God's sight" from "in human sight." More immediately, we have to split Luke 17.

19) For if all the church can say to believers is, "Your faith has saved you" in some disembodied sense, who will say the other two, very bodily things that Jesus said, first, that the lepers were now cured enough to show the authorities and, second, "Rise and go home"--a medical release? If we said that we would have to show results.

20) It is that, isn't it, which we are almost certain we cannot do, show bodily, empirical evidence--Easter, the Incarnation, the Real Presence to the contrary notwithstanding, not to mention Luke 17? So we shrink from telling our sick, as Jesus did, that their faith has healed them, sickness and all. For what if nothing happened?

21) Still, if nothing does happen, nothing in the way of bodily healing, then isn't it a real question whether the patient is saved, either? At least if Luke 17 is any clue, not to mention the rest of that gospel, it would have been meaningless for Jesus to pronounce the tenth leper healed/saved had his leprosy not been cleansed as well.

22) On the other hand, dare we endanger the church's credibility by following Jesus' lead that far--practicing medicine without a license, iffy at best? We may even question whether we have Jesus' gift for that, or his promise. At the same time, not to declare our sick ones healed jeopardizes our believability with them, the believers.

23) See what all is at stake when we so shrink "Your faith has saved you" as to exclude "Your faith has healed you," bodily. We may excuse our reluctance by saying, Who are we to speak for Christ, let alone for God? But if so, then we can't tell them their faith has even saved them. Come to think of it, we don't much tell them that anymore either.

24) What do we do? Rather than speak for Christ, which is awfully daunting, we fall back instead upon second-best: we pray. That is, we settle simply for speaking to Christ, which is safer. Recall, that is all the ten lepers did: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." That way, the onus was on him alone. If he failed, no one could fault them.

25) Is that why healing services, even bedside visits, tend to major in prayer, minor in verdicts? Because that way, as healers, we are off the hook? That way, we need not go out on a limb making promises we cannot deliver, medically. That way, we save face.

26) Praying, speaking to God is fine for an opener, a cry of need. But what that begs is Christ's reply, his declaration of health. That, we decline to speak. Only because we can't back it up with his results? Worse, mightn't we renege because we don't see what he sees in the first place, what it is about believers' faith that heals/saves them?

27) We asked, above, Shouldn't we be God-talking, not only in the sense of talking about God or even to God--of course we should--but in the sense of speaking in God's behalf, specifically for Christ. Would that we could. Yet for us to say in the stead of Christ, "Your faith has healed you," presupposes we can discern which faith heals, and why.

D. "Glow-ry"

28) The evangelist reports that the tenth leper upon being cured returned to Jesus, "glorifying God." Here lies the clue to what is unique about this leper's faith, what is healing/saving about it. He alone, by believing as he did, was "glorifying God." Yes, but what does that mean?

29) Some translations aren't as helpful as they might be. For example, NRSV, instead of "glorifying God," under-translates it merely as "praising God." That tells us only what the leper himself was doing, not what difference he made to God. The word "glorifying" at least hints at that deeper dimension, God's response to him.

30) To say that this new believer was "glorifying" God is like saying he made God glow, facially. We could as well spell "glory" as "glow-ry." Biblically, that glow-ry is always quite visible. It shows. It is God "making his face to shine upon you" (Nu 6:25). The glory of God is God beaming like a doting parent.

31) Where does the glow of the fond parent show? Where else but in the face of the child doted upon. Her being loved is something she "glories" in, revels in, basks in, for all the world to see. Her own radiance reflects the one with whom she interfaces. The glory of God is as interpersonal, as interfacial as that, visible in the one "getting" loved.

32) One evening while strolling through a shopping mall we saw a young father with his little girl in tow. He was laughing hilariously, evidently at something she had just said that delighted him. She in turn, beaming back, was pleased as punch--at how pleased her dad was with her. She was glow-rying in his glow. That is what faith is.

32a) That is what faith is, yes, but not because faith imitates or resembles the father's smile--that, only secondarily--but first of all because faith trusts and enjoys the father's smile, indeed lives off of it. The father's pleasure with his little tot is so contagious she "contracts" it, as confidence in him.

33) In Luke 17 the one who parallels the little girl, you would think, is Jesus. For isn't that basic gospel: if you want to see God glowing, look at God's Son as the reflection of his Father's pride in him? That may be Pauline or Johannine or Chalcedonian. But remember, here Luke is still reporting the pre-resurrection, pre-"glorified" Jesus.

34) Actually, in our Lukan story the character who parallels the little girl in my story is the tenth leper. He is the one depicted as glowing back God's prior glowing on him. But of course, where had God glowed on him? The leper knows exactly where. He heads straight back to Jesus, and without the help of Paul or John or the catholic creeds.

35) Literally, Jesus says of the leper not only that he "glorified" God but, more strongly still, that he "gave God glory." He gave God something God had not had before, not in the person of this sinner, something God must have in order to be this world's God: creatures glorying in their Creator's love of them. And where? Here, "at Jesus' feet."

36) It is not as if God has no glory unless we recognize it, anymore than God's name is not holy unless we hallow it. But as catechumens confess, the goal is that God's name "may be holy among us also." Thus, when faith "gives God glory," it brings out a smile on God's face, where? Where God's infectious smile catches on "among us also," as faith.

37) The comparison with the little girl and her dad breaks down at another point: we, who observed them, were eavesdroppers looking in from the outside. Not so, the leper. It wasn't on us spectators that the dad was beaming but only on his own child. In Luke 17, however, God was beaming not only on the Son but through him on the leper.

38) And it is the leper in turn, only once removed, who in faith comes aglow with the same love that God showers on the Son. God's love is not restricted to this only Child, Jesus, but on the contrary is intended to be catching, and the leper's faith is the catching of it, to the great delight of the Son at acquiring a new brother.

39) See, we have come a bit closer to answering our question, If "healed" means "saved" what does "saved" mean? At least we have stretched our vocabulary by another set of synonyms. The tenth leper's faith has healed/saved him in that his faith catches the glow of God's mercy on him in Jesus. Faith is radiant health by reflection.

40) Faith is, in Nicene language, what the Son himself is, "Light from Light," though his believers are his Light once removed and mirrored in a glass darkly. But their faith does mirror Christ's Light, his glow. That means faith shows, at least for those who have eyes to see. But even when it goes unseen, there is something there to be seen.

41) And that is? Whatever it is, notice: With this stretched notion of faith as "giving glory to God" "at Jesus' feet," we know a bit more what to look for in a faith that heals, truly heals bodily. That should help us to tell our sick ones, "seeing their faith," not only "Your faith has saved you" but also "Your faith has healed you." "Rise, go home."

42) So then, how does a patient look to whom we, speaking in Christ's behalf, can say, "Your faith has healed you"? Don't be surprised if she looks something like that Healer in whose love she "glow-ries." The tenth leper, again, is a case in point. How does his faith reflect, not necessarily resemble but glow from, the very Jesus who heals him?

43) First of all, as any camcorder could record, notice who it is to whom the leper "turned back," leaving the priests behind, who it is he approaches "praising God with a loud voice," who it is he "thanked" for his cure, at whose feet he "prostrated himself." This is already quite different from his initial prayer, "Jesus, Master, have mercy."

44) Now what the leper, the ex-leper, is doing looks more like doxology. (*Doxa* is Greek for "glory.") If that is still prayer, speaking to Jesus, it is no longer petitionary prayer but eucharistic, thanksgiving. More profoundly, it is confession, a confession of faith. That is how Jesus sees it: for the faith it reflects. And the faith reflects him.

45) Earlier we imagined ourselves standing before our sick ones, tongue-tied, wondering how we could move beyond the initial cry for help, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us," how we could dare to declare outright, speaking for Christ, "Your faith has healed you." We faltered because we lacked evidence in the patient herself.

46) Well, then, taking a tip from Jesus' handling of this leper, mightn't we, before we do any declaring at all, let the patient do some declaring of her own. Let her declare herself. There is after all a long tradition of pastoral care of the sick and the dying to make their own confession, not only of sin but of faith.

47) If necessary, in order to encourage such initiative from the patient, ask her whom she credits for her healing. Then listen. She may even need coaching, but not in a way that steals her lines or upstages her. It is her confession, prompted by us not to make her feel better but to provide us a basis for our next line, "Your faith has healed you."

48) Of course it isn't really our next line but Christ's, ventured by us, yet only on the strength of whatever clues in the patient we can divine through Christ's eyes. His first move with the leper, we saw, was to hear out the latter's confession. But there were plenty other clues the leper exhibited, the kinds we too can look for.

49) Caution: although these other clues, too, are clues to the leper's healing, they will reflect, remember, the Healer himself, who often looked like anything but healed. Indeed, Jesus is famous (or notorious) for having glow-rified suffering. It is precisely his claim to have won by losing, dying even. Does that show in the leper's healing, too?

50) We may ask about the leper, How much better off was he really after he met Jesus than before? Note his reaction to his cleansing: his going over the heads of the priests, his noisy demonstration in front of Jesus, virtually worshipping a human creature, only reenforcing the ethnic prejudice against him as a Samaritan.

51) In short, the onetime leper now makes a fool of himself, not only socially but perhaps even spiritually, in ways that violate what today we call "spiritual healing." What self-doubts he must have incurred, once he got home, for having compromised his sacred monotheism and the God-ordained cultus--perhaps a worse stigma than ever.

52)

(This is dated 6-04-01.)