

# Salvation(s)

**Robert W. Bertram**

[Address given 8 March 2001 at Congregation Temple Israel, St. Louis, MO for an InterFaith Partnership Meeting]

Summary: When the Christian gospel speaks of the salvation of the world, it raises a question: what is it that is being saved, the world's sinners or the sinners' world?  
Answer: there is no saving the world's sinners without saving their world along with them, beginning with that part of the world which is closest to them, their own bodies. But how about the reverse, saving the sinners' world without saving its sinners? Ah, that is something else. There may indeed be a saving, a kind of saving of the sinners' world without saving them. Granted, in Christian parlance that may not qualify as "salvation." Yet when that is the best that can be hoped for, then, even if it means losing sinners themselves to their own druthers, it is the Christian thing--the very heart of the Christian pathos--to help them save at least as much of their world as possible, beginning with their own bodies.

## Some Theses for Discussion

A. When the Christian gospel speaks of the salvation of the world, what is it that is being saved: the world's sinners or the sinners' world? At stake is our interface with, well, with what? With the Creator? Or with the creation? "Personal salvation," as we used to call it, or "cosmic salvation"? Which is it?

1) The question is not contrived. It lurks within the very sources of Christianity, as even an unsophisticated, first-glance reading of the biblical texts will show.

2) A favorite summary of the gospel announces that "God so loved the world [in Greek *kosmos*] that he gave his only Son," Jesus Christ. Here salvation still sounds cosmic enough, until we ask, Which cosmos, or How much of it? Answer: "Everyone who believes in him." (Jn. 3:16) Suddenly the savable universe seems to have shrunk.

3) Leaving aside for now the issue of universalism, the question of those humans who do not believe in Jesus Christ, there is the larger question about the whole, vast non-human creation. Surely there is more to the cosmos than its human inhabitants, as also the Johannine portion of the New Testament agrees there is.

4) Indeed the Johannine passage we just quoted, though it still limits "eternal life" to believers in Christ, immediately repeats the big promise "that the world [again *kosmos*]

might be saved through him." (Jn. 3:17) So we are back to the initial question, What is being saved: the world's sinners or the sinners' world?

5) The preferred answer, of course, is yes, to both. I say "of course" because the very suggestion of an either-or is a false disjunction, isn't it? Saving the world's sinners without saving their world as well, the first without the second, seems not only false but obviously false.

6) Yes, that either-or is false. But obviously? The fallacy hasn't always been that self-evident. Indeed, that is why the distinction was needed in the first place between, say, "personal" and "cosmic" salvation, precisely to call attention to the latter, the cosmos. It was in danger of being overlooked, its salvation neglected.

7) There was a time not long ago when Christians were tempted to fixate on their own salvation to the exclusion of the non-human creation. They (we) could sing blithely of "Greenland's icy mountains [and] India's coral strand," where "every prospect pleases." That part of the creation, it seemed, was not the problem, at least not our problem.

8) What was, the next line made bluntly clear: "only man is vile." As the hymn swelled to its climax, "Salvation, oh, salvation," the antithesis seemed inescapable: what needed saving was the world's sinners, not the sinners' world. Maybe the world didn't even need to be saved from its sinners, let alone by them.

9) By now that old imbalance has been considerably redressed. In recent years Christians have re-learned that there simply is no saving the world's sinners without also saving the world they are in, in which and by which and against which they sin.

10) Nowadays talk about salvation, still called soteriology also by liberation theologians, is apt to include in the saving such mundane creatures as the ozone layer or wildlife or the genome, not to mention the immediately human sector of that same world: food chains, immune systems, sex, local economies--all targets for salvaging.

11) That follows, if only because to save sinners is already to save at least that much of the world. For that is what they are: enfleshed worldlings. They themselves are inextricably enmeshed in the world not first by their sin but by their very creation.

12) Already as a boy I was catechized to recite that "God has made me and all creatures . . . ." Actually, the "and" was too weak a translation. The German original reads, "together with all creatures." Many of us have long known (by heart) that the person-cosmos solidarity is indissoluble.

13) Add to that the reminder penitents receive every Lent when their foreheads are marked with ashen crosses, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Not much of a world-sinner difference there, except that it is the sinners who need reminding. That's why they do: being sinners they widen distinctions into disjunctions.

14) Likewise, for sinners to be saved from their sin is not to be withdrawn from the world, certainly not from its bodiliness. Ever. On the other hand, since they are so deeply into the world, so is their sin. That is why the world, too, needs to be rid of their sin--without, we hope, being rid of them.

15) Apostle Paul pictures the whole non-human environment as groaning in labor pains, waiting expectantly for us humans, "the children of God," to be delivered first. For only as we finally are redeemed from our sin are our bodies redeemed by resurrection from death. (Ro. 8:19-23)

16) Since it is as bodies that we are linked to the rest of the cosmos, the cosmos in turn has a vested interest in what happens bodily to us humans. Our resurrection, triggered by the raising of Jesus from the dead, has a domino effect (so to speak) on the cosmos as a whole. We are "the first fruits of the Spirit" preceding the full crop (Ro. 8:23)

17) Thus the salvation confessed in the creed joins into one sentence--distinguishes but does not disjoin--"the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" and, for that reason, the salvation of the cosmos generally, including such physical creatures as space and time.

18) Fact is, this inherent nexus from the forgiveness of sin through bodily resurrection to lasting life, long before it materializes in The Final Analysis, was anticipated already in Jesus' ministry of healing the sick and the dying.

19) Jesus' healing continues, as his, in his church today, "the communion of saints" or, better translated, "the sharing of holing/healing things." This healing provides a close-up of the sinner-world link. The sinner's body is her world at its closest. There is no "saving" her without "healing" it. In Greek they are the same verb.

20) Then why even make the distinction? To remind us of what might otherwise be left out, in this case the world. We have been distinguishing, not disjoining, the world from its sinners precisely to emphasize that there is no saving them without saving it as well. That is all one salvation. The same verb, "save" or "heal," applies throughout.

B. But how about the reverse, saving the sinners' world without saving its sinners? Ah, that is something else. There may indeed be a saving, a kind of saving of the sinners' world without saving them. Granted, in Christian parlance that may not qualify as "salvation." Here we do have a real disjunction, an either-or.

1) Distinctions serve also this second function. Not only do they reclaim what we slight, namely the cosmos. Distinctions also disclaim. Take Jesus' ominous distinction, "What will it profit a person to gain the whole world [*kosmos*] and forfeit one's life" or, better, oneself (in Greek, *psyche*)? (Mk. 8:36)

2) Here the distinction functions as a disjunction, the sort of either-or which Christians like Kierkegaard emphasized. Either the person himself is saved (and only then his world with him) or he is not saved, no matter how much of his world is.

3) Where it is only the sinner's world, not himself, which he "gains," he is not said to have "saved" anything. Here there is no talk of salvation. Not that the lingo of gains and losses is too crass. Jesus actually favors that commercial idiom. The pity is precisely that the mere world-gainer makes no "profit," only a loss, a bad deal. Crass? Sure.

4) Nor is it that the sinner in question has no interest in saving himself. He may indeed. Then why doesn't he succeed at that most rewarding of all ventures? Not for lack of trying, surely. For lack of smarts? Perhaps for lack of a certain kind of smarts.

5) But someone who has "gained" the whole world, why can't he of all people save himself (*psyche*)? Because he--even he, he especially--can't afford the price. Jesus explains: "For those who want to save their life [*psyche*] will lose it, and those who lose their life [*psyche*] for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mk. 8:35)

6) The reason the sinner cannot save himself is that, in order to do that, he would have to lose himself. And no sinner is entrepreneur enough, fool enough to risk so dire a loss. Not that the saving of selves is impossible. It is simply unaffordable.

7) For sinners "to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," as Jesus knew, is simply more than they can pay. (Mk. 8:34) "Cross" is the tip-off. The price is so exorbitant as to be impossible, not impossible altogether but humanly so.

8) Before we switch to a passage about healing (which, remember, is the same word as "saving") notice: in the Markan passage just read Jesus addressed one of the toughest questions in medicine, the high cost of healing. "How," we hear at every admissions office, "do you plan to pay for this operation?" "Who is your primary carrier"?

9) You would think theologians would have a field day with that question. The currently popular "spiritual" healing seems to avoid it. "Who is going to pay for this"? When the question arises, as it does already at the ER, most patients in my experience intuitively sense that "pay" means more than money. So did Jesus.

10) As the chemotherapy begins, certainly the cancer cells know who will pay. They will. So do bacteria, up against an antibiotic. See how they resist, they who are very much a part of the cosmos. No wonder they yearn for the sinner to get beyond sin and death and into resurrection. Until then, the buck stops with them, the "world."

11) But first the buck stops with sinners, especially as patients, most especially when they are poor hence without modern medicine and nutrition. With the poor, of course, tumors and bacteria have a better chance of being saved. But not the patients. What kind of cosmic salvation is that?

12) Ultimately, not even rich sinners can afford the price of salvation, the loss of themselves. Here Christian soteriology proposes an alternative. On a crucifix at home we have stuck a home-made label, one which upstages Pontius Pilate's "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Ours is Harry Truman's desk motto, "The buck stops here."

13) Now to a specific case of Jesus' healing, Lk. 17:11-19, his "healing of the ten lepers" as it is often mis-titled. I say mis-titled because, strictly speaking, he "healed" or "saved" only one of the ten lepers. The other nine he did not, could not. That is the disjunction, namely, between the nine and the one.

14) True, all ten of the lepers "were made clean," as they themselves discovered. (v.14) (The Greek is a verb from which we get our word "catharsis.") In other words, all were cured of their leprosy, observably enough to rate a clean bill of health also from the medical-religious authorities.

15) But only one of the ten who were "made clean" is said to have been "healed," and then only when Jesus pronounces him so. What is it that Jesus sees in him that distinguishes him from all the rest as alone "healed" (or "saved" or "made whole" or "made well"?)

17) The leper himself may or may not have recognized that he was as improved as Jesus saw. But there is definitely one thing which only Jesus identifies as the cause of his healing. "Your faith has made you well" (or "saved" you.) (v. 19) We have only Jesus' word for that, no clinical proof, no double-blind tests, no peer review.

18) Let those who are interested in "alternative medicine," particularly in its faith healing, not be too quick to equate that with the faith of this tenth leper. Recall, the other nine lepers too were cured medically, but their cure was not credited to anything like faith in the Lukan sense. Maybe for them Jesus was a placebo. Whatever works!

19) That is a circular understanding of faith: healing faith is faith that heals. We do better to examine what the Lukan Jesus means by "faith" if instead we connect it with something else in the story, not first with its medical, somatic effects but with its effect, of all things, upon God.

20) Luke says that the leper upon being cured "gave glory to God." (vv. 15, 18) (NRSV under-translates that merely as he "praised" or "gave praise" to God.) The leper actually "gave" God something which God did not have before, not in the person of this leper, something which God must have in order to be God: "glory," here in this world.

21) "Glory" might just as well be spelled glow-ry. The glory of God is God glowing, facially. It is God beaming like a doting parent, "making his face to shine upon you." (Nu.6:25) Biblically, that glow is always something quite visible, empirical, open (shall we say) to peer review. It shows.

22) Where does the glow of the fond parent show? Where else but in the face of the child so doted upon. In response she glories, revels, basks in her being loved, for all the world to see. The glory of God is as inter-personal, as reciprocal, as dialogical, as inter-facial as that. The leper who "glorifies" God is God's own radiance once removed.

23) That is "faith", the leper's reflex of God's "mercy." (v.13) Where had God shown mercy on him, quite empirically? He knows exactly where. He heads back to Jesus. There "he prostrated himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked him." (v.16) Mercy meets itself coming back. God (in Jesus) reappears in his "image," the leper. (Gn. 1:27)

24) But the leper's saying thank-you, isn't that just good manners, giving credit where credit is due? Perhaps, but that noisily? (v.15) Breaching ethnic barriers to do it? ("He was a Samaritan.") Flat on his face? That sounds more like doxology, "giving glory [*doxa*] to God"--giving glory back to God where God had shone it first.

25) The dialogue isn't over yet. Jesus' reply to the leper's thank-you is no mere polite "You're welcome." Typically, Jesus' beneficiaries' first response is to distance themselves from him, face down. But Jesus' counter-response is to raise them back up as his equals. "Get up," he tells the leper, "and go on your way." (v. 19)

26) And now the climactic punch-line, "Your faith has healed [or saved] you." (v.19) Jesus returns the leper's compliment. Indeed he addresses him as one would address deity, crediting something in the leper himself, his "faith," as the thing which endears him to God. (Here squeamish Christians squirm.) But notice, faith in whom?

27) That whole dialogue, from the leper's cry for mercy to Jesus' "reckoning his faith as righteousness" (Gn. 15:6) is what we mean by salvation. See, there was no saving the sinner without already saving, beginning to, his world as well--both his interfaces at once, with Creator and creation. The cost to the leper? Temporary loss of face, of self.

28) By contrast with the other nine, see what this one leper was saved from: not just from leprosy but (dare we say it?) from God-- God's glower versus God's glow. See what he was restored to: not just to "normal," as medicine defines health, but to junior deity. See how he was saved, not from death but through it, by way of Another's.

29) Yet the whole point of this second battery of theses was to concede, with deepest regret, that what distinguishes the tenth leper's "salvation" also disjoins him from the mere "cure" of his nine fellows. That disjunction is too painful to talk about here, though sometime we should, God granting time.

30) In the Lukan account there is no mistaking the disappointment in Jesus' question, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give [glory] to God except this foreigner?" (v. 18) Bully for Number Ten. But only one out of ten? Who wouldn't be disappointed? Surely no God who is human.

C. Granted, in Christian parlance the "cure" of the nine may not qualify as "salvation." Yet when that is the best that can be hoped for, then, even if it means losing sinners themselves to their own druthers, it is the Christian thing--the very heart of the Christian pathos--to help them save at least as much of their world as possible, beginning with their own bodies.

1) Disappointed as he was over the response from the other nine, Jesus shows not the slightest regret that he had done for them what he did. On the contrary, healing, even short-term healing, and not only of believers but of sinners generally, regardless of their prognosis, still defines the ministry of his followers, especially his "laity."

2) Perhaps I can make the point best with a brief parable. These lines are being written between clinical tests in a hospital, operated (though no longer owned) by the Sisters of Mercy (sic.) No one has asked with which lepers I am affiliated, the one or the nine, whether I prefer to be "saved" or merely "cured."

3) To all appearances the sisters' one soteriological goal with me is my interface with the creation, specifically with my brain. Nothing is said of my interface with the Creator. And yes, they do ask about payment. Still, I can hardly miss the fact that on the wall hangs a modest crucifix, where I seem to recall the buck stops.

4) Inside the MRI tunnel, lying stiffly on the slab, the last thing I see as the rigid mask closes over my face is a brace over the bridge of my nose, courtesy of General Electric. But the brace unmistakably is in the shape of a cross, a very Latin cross. I am caught in the cross-hairs. The sisters thought of everything. It is hard not to laugh.

5) That same bemusing paradox, both interfaces at once, intersects for all the world to see in the ministry of Jesus the Christ and, I would hope, in the ministry of his most mundane followers.

Robert W. Bertram

Seminex Professor (Emeritus) of Historical  
and Systematic Theology, LSTC