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# Preaching the gospel from the Gospels

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## Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels

George R. Beasley-Murray

Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996

282 pages, \$17.50 Softcover

As a Lutheran pastor, I immediately assumed that the title *Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels* alluded to the struggle of finding “good news” (understood through the lens of St. Paul and Martin Luther) in the first four books of the New Testament. The so-called “hard sayings” of Jesus, the frequent exhortations to cross-bearing and discipleship, the “go and do likewise” message of the parables frequently confront our Lutheran paranoia about “good works” and make preaching “the Gospel” from the gospels a theological and homiletical challenge. On the other hand, those who dwell in the religio-linguistic community of George R. Beasley-Murray probably jump to a different conclusion assuming that “preaching the gospel” is the rough linguistic equivalent of “preaching” even when that preaching tends toward the law side of the law/gospel dialectic. In fact, they turn out to be right. This book is not about theological tensions at all. It is a conservative evangelical Bible study of the life, miracles, teachings, and parables of Jesus as they are reported to us through the four gospels.

For this work, Beasley-Murray has revised a series of his lectures from the 1950s when “form criticism was all the rage”. Unfortunately, the revision is not extensive enough to disguise the author’s historicist-literalist assumptions. There is not even a mention of the literary or philosophical hermeneutical movements. Beasley-Murray is convinced that thorough exegesis of the gospels will reveal “what really happened” and what Jesus “really said”. In fact, most of the revisions are drawn from the work of such “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus” authors as J. D. Crossan and Marcus Borg. Although Beasley-Murray reminds us of Albert Schweitzer’s wry observation that our quest for the historical Jesus always concludes with the discovery of our own reflection, he fails to escape that fate himself (e.g., in his debunking Roman Catholic exegesis of Matthew 16:18, p. 47).

This reader intuited five principles supporting Beasley-Murray’s exegetical/interpretive strategy: history of (conservative) interpretations, source and redaction criticism, word study, common sense assumptions about “what must have happened” in the gaps (for example, Jesus meditating on the Old Testament in the years before his ministry, p. 110), and an odd speculative translation theory. This last suggests that we can access the “authentic words of Jesus” by translating back from Greek to Aramaic and then giving preference to the Greek passages which yield the most pleasing Aramaic results. So, for example, both Luke’s and Matthew’s

versions of the Lord's Prayer can be "retroverted" to produce Aramaic versions which have both pleasing meter and rhyme clearly (?) suggesting that they must, therefore, be authentic.

Beasley-Murray does provide some high quality philology. Although peppered with his common sense imaginings, his descriptions of the first-century *Sitz im Leben* are helpful. However, much of this material could be located in any number of excellent commentaries. Beasley-Murray should be affirmed, too, for recalling Martin Dibelius' conviction that the root source of all the gospels is the preaching of the apostles and their students. What a shame that a book nominally about preaching makes no effort to suggest how exegetical insights might be developed in actual sermons.

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### **Spirituality and Health: A New Journey of Spirit, Mind and Body**

Bruce G. Epperly

Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997

126 pages, \$9.95 US Softcover

The popular press is full of articles on spirituality and health. Holistic medicine, alternative medicines, and multi-understandings of spirituality have been some of the prime causes for this interest. Bruce Epperly seeks in his book "to provide a Christian vision of health and wholeness for contemporary persons" (5). He succeeds partly in this ambitious goal. Epperly is an ordained minister in the Church of Christ, has a doctorate from Claremont Graduate School in California and is adjunct professor of theology and community medicine at Georgetown University.

Epperly believes that the Christian notion of health is the integration of body, mind, and spirit. Drawing on biblical texts, he argues that Jesus healed everyone in some form or another. He also argues that prayer, a healthy diet, exercise, spiritual healing, alternative medicines are aids to health. He maintains that spirituality and health affect each other. Just as one's spirituality can help one's health so one's health can also influence one's spirit. Epperly is careful to note that spirituality does not determine health. There are many persons who are sick with chronic illness whose spirituality has not cured their physical body.

This book is easy to read, cites some relevant medical and theological studies in terms of spirituality and health, and offers some concrete helps in