

The Promise of Promise: Retrospect and Prospect of a Homiletical Theology

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Abstract: *North American homiletical theology has been increasingly retrieving and revising a theology of promise for preaching. This article offers a Forschungsbericht concerning the use of promise in homiletical theology. It does so initially by retracing traditions of promise with respect to multiple theological concerns: the dialectic of promise and law in the gospel, the role of promise in eschatology, Word and Sacrament, and in theologies of the scriptures with respect to Old and New Testaments. The essay next considers the place of promise in contemporary homiletics. It discusses treatments of promise in the work of North American homileticians James Kay, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, David Lose, Olin Moyd, Christine Smith, David Schnasa Jacobsen, Richard Lischer, and Paul Wilson as well as briefly treating promise in light of the broader concerns of Eunjo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, Dale Andrews, and Ronald Allen and Joey Jeter. The article suggests future promising areas of research and lays a groundwork for future scholarly contributions.*

North American homiletical theology has been increasingly retrieving and even revising a theology of “promise” for preaching today. Homileticians like James Kay, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, David Lose, Olin Moyd, Christine Smith, Richard Lischer, and Paul Wilson have developed a theology of promise as a prominent theme in some of their work. Meanwhile, homileticians such as Eunjo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, Dale Andrews, as well as Ronald Allen and Joey Jeter have touched on promise in connection with other important theological commitments. The essay that follows is a preliminary *Forschungsbericht*, a research report of how a theology of promise has shaped various aspects of a homiletical theology in the past and might influence its prospects going forward. Its goal is to reinvigorate a discussion of promise as part of the ongoing, unfinished constructive task of homiletical theology.¹

Most recently, a homiletical theology of promise has re-emerged with the publication of *Kairos Preaching* in 2009.² In their book, David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly broached the problem of a homiletical theology of promise through a critical retrieval of a theology of the

¹ I view homiletical theology as type of constructive theology. It does its work in light of practices of preaching, its cultural context, and the theories that animate the homiletician’s work. As David Buttrick notes, it might be better to turn Barth’s notion that all theology is sermon preparation on its head. Rather all sermon preparation is theology (“Foreword.” *Homiletics*. Trans. G. Bromiley and D. Davis. Louisville: WJKP, 1991, 8). A homiletical theology, furthermore, is not merely another word for a theology of preaching. In practice, it can entail dealing with theologies of the gospel, Word and Sacrament, the use of theology in the sermon, as well as preaching itself as theology (i.e., theological method). The article that follows demonstrates that a homiletical theology of promise is far more than a theology of preaching, but touches in a homiletical mode on a variety of theological loci relevant to the constructive-theological task: e.g., scripture, eschatology, the means of grace, etc. For a vision of constructive theology related to such theological loci, see *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classic Themes: A Project of The Workgroup On Constructive Christian Theology*. Eds. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. For more on homiletical theology, see the new research project web site: www.bu.edu/homiletical-theology-project. Accessed November 24, 2012.

² David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelley, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1–41.

gospel. Their discussion centered on what the gospel is and how the gospel relates to both context and the kinds of situations that call forth gospel speech. As a central part of their work into the character of the gospel, they retrieved the Reformation notion of the gospel as radical promise. This insight leads to a potentially more integrated way of thinking about gospel: not only what gospel says (its starting point + unfolding theological reflection on the gospel through commonplaces), but what the gospel *does as promise*.

Viewed historically, however, a full retrieval of promise includes ranges of meanings and spheres of interest that go far beyond a theology of the gospel. Already in some early literature, the notion of promise was tied to other theological loci: eschatology and the purposes of God, theologies of Word and Sacrament, and the relationship between the testaments that make up the scriptures. Thus the potential value of promise goes far beyond the traditional Reformation concern to anchor preaching in a theo-centric vision of God's grace in the gospel. This means we now have an opportunity to re-envision the place of promise in our late-modern context with respect to a broader array of homiletical-theological issues, many of which we have been struggling with for some time in other terms. This essay, therefore, begins with a review of what "promise" has been, turns to the way promise has been treated in 20th and 21st CE homiletical theology and theory, and along the way identifies new resources beyond theology that may challenge us to take up and re-envision for ourselves a place for promise in our own homiletical theologies going forward.

Promise in Retrospect: Homiletical Theologies from Augustine to Wesley

The history of the role of promise in thinking theologically about the preaching task is a surprisingly diverse one. When we hear the word promise, we might at first be inclined to focus solely on the distinction between "promise and law," a dialectic that runs from an Augustinian³ reading of Paul through Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and beyond. While this focus on grace is indeed an important part of the tradition, the treatment of promise actually encompasses several other issues of concern to homiletical theology. In this retrospect, therefore, we want to survey the historical picture in all its fullness.

1. Promise and Law: Dialectical Diversity

The clearest line on the topic of promise runs from Augustine's reading of Paul through Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and down into Wesley. In Augustine's important homiletic work, *On Christian Doctrine*, we see him translate in Book III Tyconius' wrestling with promises and the law into his hard-won anti-Pelagian position spelled out in "Spirit and the Letter." This

³ Augustine in Book III.33 summarizes Tyconius' third rule, "the promises and the law," and assimilates it to his own theology of "spirit and letter" or "grace and law," a view developed in response to the Pelagian controversy, *On Christian Doctrine* (D. Robertson, trans.; New York: Macmillan, 1958), 107–08. Tyconius' own view of promise is actually a bit broader, as is evidenced by his continued heavy use of the term promise (*promissio*) well into his fourth rule, on genus and species, which Augustine understands in purely rhetorical terms (*OCD* Book III.34), but Tyconius understands eschatologically and with special ecclesial contextual significance for his North African Donatist church. For a translation of this 4th CE North African text and its discussion of Rules 3 and 4, see *Tyconius: The Book of Rules* (W. Babcock, trans.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 20–88. For an attempt at understanding how this struggle in North African hermeneutics has impacted homiletics' unfolding understanding of a theology of promise, see David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Augustine's Use of Tyconius' *Book of Rules* in *On Christian Doctrine*: Promise and the Unfinished Task of Homiletical Theology," *Collected Papers of the 47th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (2012), 215–24. Perhaps this historical struggle over the nature of promise represents part of our unfinished theological task as a discipline.

notion of promise was taken up in the work of the Reformers. For the early Luther in particular, the dialectic of gospel and law is understood chiefly as a relationship of *promise* and law. The law drives us to the promise in this sense: that is, what God commands drives us to petition God to be true to God's promise. For Luther, interestingly and uniquely, the promise is an external reality to which the believer holds. The contrast comes to this view already in Calvin. For Calvin, the dialectic of promise and law is also important. Calvin writes:

We make the foundation of faith the gratuitous promise, because in it faith properly consists... [Faith] begins with the promise, stands upon it, and ends in it. For it seeks life in God, which is not found in the commands nor in the edicts of punishment but in the promise of mercy, and that only which is gratuitous, for a conditional promise, which sends us back to our works, promises life insofar as we find it in ourselves... Wherefore the Apostle bears witness to this testimony to the gospel, that it is the word of faith, which he denies to both the precepts and promises of the Law, since there is nothing which can establish faith except that free embassy by which God reconciles the world to himself.⁴

Where Calvin differs from Luther in his understanding of the promise is in its internalization. With the doctrine of assurance, Calvin actually internalizes the notion of promise to include its appropriation by the believer as a sign of election. The distinction about promise here, between external and internal promise, is actually an important one for understanding this classic, dialectical view of promise and law. Philosopher Phillip Cary argues that Luther's external vs. Calvin's internal view of promise has an important impact on what he calls the standard Protestant syllogism:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.

Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am saved.⁵

From this classic, Protestant view Luther's syllogism considers the promise external, an utterance in context, and understood sacramentally:

Major premise: Christ told me, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth.

Conclusion: I am baptized (that is, I have new life in Christ).⁶

For Calvin, however, the internalized notion of promise connected to a doctrine of assurance *changes* the way promise is understood:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.

Minor Premise: I know that I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am saved.

⁴ *Institutes* III.2.xxix.

⁵ P. Cary, "Sola Fide: Luther and Calvin," in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71:3/4 (July/October, 2007), 266.

⁶ *Idem.* 267.

Here, Cary points out, the unique Calvinist understanding of election, perseverance, assurance, and a growing focus on a once-and-for-all conversion work together to view promise not as an external reality, but an internal one.⁷ For Calvin, faith in the promise is an internal, reflective faith; for Luther faith is trusting the Word of God, uttered sacramentally, an external promise to which one holds in *Anfechtung*. A historical distinction about promise is not just of antiquarian interest. The way in which we conceive promise and its relation to faith conditions the way in which we understand promise functioning in our own homiletical theology today. We will see some similar differences emerge when we turn to the matter of promise in recent homiletics later.

We finish this survey of the promise/law dialectic by connecting it also to Melanchthon and the Wesleyan tradition. For Melanchthon, the distinction between promise and law is important for establishing the correlative relationship of promise and faith.⁸ The reason for this is Melanchthon's connection of promise to the doctrine of justification and its relation to the last judgment. For Wesley, the clear distinction between promise and law becomes a bit more complicated. As an explanation for the workings of promise in light of the high demands of the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley conceives of the category of "covered promises." For Wesley, law and promise refer to the same thing, but in different form:

We may yet farther observe, that every command in holy writ is only a covered promise. For by that solemn declaration, "This is the covenant I will make after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws in your minds, and write them in your hearts," God hath engaged to give whatsoever he commands. Does he command us then to "pray without ceasing?" To "rejoice evermore?" "To be holy as He is holy?" It is enough. He will work in us this very thing. It shall be unto us according to his word.⁹

Thus, while the promise/law dialectic is a significant part of the tradition of a homiletical theology of promise, there is much diversity within that tradition. Promise is indeed distinguished from law, but not always the same way. In fact, sometimes promise is viewed as an external utterance; at other times it is seen as a matter of internal assurance about election. Sometimes promise and law are clearly distinguished; other times the distinction seems to be less clearly maintained.

2. *Promise and Eschatology*

I noted above that the hermeneutical differences between Augustine and Tyconius, when Augustine summarizes the latter's work in Book III of *On Christian Doctrine*, led to Augustine emptying Tyconius' more eschatological view of "promise."¹⁰ This struggle over promise may just be a very important one for us to re-visit today. There are today echoes of this concern for the relationship of God's promise to eschatology in contemporary theology, especially in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, to whom I will refer more explicitly later in this essay. It is also true that the eschatological approach to a homiletical theology of promise is alive and well in

⁷ Idem. 269–76.

⁸ Phillip Melanchthon, *Melanchthon on Christian doctrine: Loci communes, 1555* (C. Manschreck, ed. and trans.; New York: Oxford, 1965), 158.

⁹ Wesley, Sermon 25.

¹⁰ See footnote 3 above.

African-American theologies of preaching as well as theological approaches to prophetic preaching.¹¹ Certainly, the rediscovery of eschatology in early Christian literature since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer has caused a general reassessment of its place in theology over the last century. The linking of those concerns to promise would seem to be a natural place to invite further homiletical-theological reflection for us today.

3. *Promise and the Relationship of the Testaments in the Scriptures*

Another key place for thinking about promise for homiletical theology is in the relationship between the two testaments. As James Preus points out, the line of promise that runs from Augustine to Luther is not merely concerned with a theological dialectic, but seeks to grasp how Christians are to understand and interpret the Hebrew Bible for proclamation.¹² In his brilliant work, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, Preus begins with Augustine's continuous view of Old Testament and New Testament promises which in varying ways contribute to a "normative literal sense," which contributes to "faith, hope, and love."¹³ This means that some temporal promises of the Old Testament are interpreted figuratively for Christians. Augustine's distinction, of course, shifts gradually through a long line of interpreters over the whole medieval period in Preus' book: namely, Hugh of St. Victor, Nicholas of Lyra, Peter Lombard, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas, and nominalist theologians, among others. A full description of this process of dealing with promise in the relationship between the testaments goes far beyond the bounds of this article. At the same time, the shifts become clear. More and more of the temporal promises get interpreted figuratively, and precisely in Christ. Preus describes the Medieval interpretive tradition that Luther receives this way: "the Old Testament promised only *temporalia*, the New promises *eternalia*... The hermeneutical expression of this religious situation is to refer to the Old Testament as 'umbra,' 'figura,' and 'signum,' which imply that its sole theological relevance is in its New Testament antitypes."¹⁴ The temptation over time is to shift away from promise to shadow, mere figure. While Preus writes to show how Luther's own reading of the Old Testament makes sense not just against the medieval tradition, but within it, its chief value for us to see how a homiletical theology of promise also opens up important questions of the relationship of traditions in our

¹¹ For the former see Olin Moyd's treatment of promise in relation to redemption, eschatology, and the whole counsel of God in *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1995), 13–65. For the latter, see Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm's essay "God's Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ" in *Anabaptist Preaching* (Ed. D. Greiser and M. King. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2003), 76–93. For an intriguing use of promise in connection with an approach to liberation preaching see Christine Smith, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001) as well as brief mentions in her chapter, "A Lesbian Perspective: Moving Toward a Promised Place," in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland: United Church, 1998), 134–58. In both cases Smith briefly links promise to a kind of liberative, critical eschatology.

¹² I am aware of the problematic language I am employing, but am trying to make historical sense of an important hermeneutical tradition. I am inclined to use the term Hebrew Bible to describe the Old Testament to honor the uniqueness of what Ron Allen has called the First Testament. I am aware how inaccurate and problematic these different terms are. At the same time, it is important to understand this hermeneutical tradition in its own terms. In their own way, they struggle to reconcile the whole of the scriptures and refuse to go the Marcionite route. At the same time, the clear trend is toward a subsidiary view of the Hebrew Bible that I view as ethically problematic.

¹³ James Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1969), 9–23.

¹⁴ Idem, 156.

canon. Given Christians' long struggle with anti-Judaism and later anti-Semitism, this merits ongoing solid homiletical-theological reflection as well.

4. *Promise and Theologies of Word and Sacrament*

Clearly promise has had an impact on the development of theologies of Word and Sacrament. The language of promise shapes not only how we think about a theology of the Word, but how that theology connects as well to conceptions of sacrament and the relationship of preaching to worship. As with the previous sections above, the arc moves from Augustine to the Reformers: Augustine links word and sign in order to describe sacraments as “visible words,”¹⁵ while Luther and the Reformers carry forward analogous sacramental concerns by naming that Word's character as promise and connecting it to sacramental elements in their theologies.¹⁶ Here, again, the Reformers play an important role. Their insistence on the importance of “testament” or promise as the key for viewing sacramental theology marked a major shift in thinking about the relationship of Word and Sacrament. In recent times, a renewed interest in the eschatological dimensions of Eucharist point also to new possibilities for homiletical theologians interested in promise. Perhaps a homiletical-theology of promise might open doors for us to see the relationship of Word and Sacrament more deeply.

The Role of Promise in Recent Homiletical Theology and Prospects for the Future

The homiletical literature of the last sixty years has certainly been aware of the importance of “promise” for thinking about preaching the gospel. At the same time, it has not remained a central, consistent concern over that period. This may be in part because of its early twentieth century association with the work of the neo-Orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann. Barth's view of promise is encapsulated nicely in his *Homiletics*. Here Barth equates promise with “announcement.” He wishes solely to distinguish gospel from any human decision—it has for him the quality of miracle and thus maintains his decidedly theocentric vision.¹⁷ For Bultmann, promise is part of the salvation event itself, which resides in preaching. This promise is an eschatological moment being made real in the present, confronting the hearer of that promise with an existential decision.¹⁸ Both of these approaches, despite the different role they ascribe to decision, limit the way they think about promise to purely dialectical terms for the individual hearer. They tend to bracket other aspects of promise, especially the more cosmic, eschatological view in favor of a breaking into the present of a kind of divine “eternality.”

Naturally, Bultmann's language of a “salvation event” paves the way for the post-Bultmannians' new hermeneutic and the rise the so-called “new homiletic” in the 70s and 80s.¹⁹

¹⁵ Augustine, Tractate 80 (John 15:1-3).

¹⁶ Luther uses this language with respect to the Eucharist as testament in the sense of a kind of promise of inheritance in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; Calvin in *Institutes* IV.xiv.3 argues that sacraments are “never without a preceding promise,” and in *Institutes* IV.xiv.5–6 points out that sacraments are God-provided seals of those very promises.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (G. Bromiley and D. Daniels, trans.; Louisville: WJK, 1991), 45–46, 72, 125.

¹⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* I (Trans. K. Grobel; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955). 302.

¹⁹ David Lose, “Whither Hence the New Homiletic,” in *The Academy of Homiletics Papers of the Annual Meeting*, November 30–December 2 (2000), 255–66. Of course, what was left out of many of these discussions that have preoccupied our histories of scholarship, is whether the new homiletic was really new! For a succinct, alternative view see Dale P. Andrews, “New to Whom?” *Homiletix E-Forum: An Electronic Journal of the Academy of Homiletics*, Fall, 2006. Accessed September 14, 2006.

Bultmann's event language does of course shape event terminology about preaching in the work of Ebeling's *Wortgeschehen* or Fuchs' *Sprachereignis*. This, of course, drew many leading homileticsians of the last generation to focus on the shape and/or function of language and the Word to help us think about the preaching task. Yet, if one digs into the work of Fuchs and Ebeling, one discovers that their event-in-language ideas are never fully disconnected from promise. In *The Nature of Faith*, Ebeling devotes the better part of a chapter to the gospel as promise:

Only the Word by which God comes to man, and promises himself, is able to do this. That this word has happened, and can therefore be spoken again and again, that a man can therefore promise God to another as the One who promises himself—this is the certainty of Christian faith. And this is the true and fulfilled event of the Word, when space is made among men for this promise, the Word of God. When God speaks, the whole of reality as it concerns us enters language anew.²⁰

Fuchs likewise understands his view of *Sprachereignis* way beyond anything like a mere language concept, but connects it specifically to Jesus' making a promise.²¹ I cite these references for two reasons, both of which impact the way in which many have assessed the so-called new homiletic as theologically deficient. First, apart from a clear theological understanding of the gospel, the language of an event in experience, which supposedly characterized the new homiletic, leaves far too many questions open. Critics as early as the 1990s pointed out, on the one hand, that an experience implied at least "an experience of *something*." Indeed a general appeal to experience without some connection to theological understanding left the field wide open to later postliberal and neo-Barthian critiques. On the other hand, the language of an event in experience also left open the question of *whose* experience.²² Here a profound ethical and representational issue came to the surface that revealed, to my mind, some inadequacies of the new homiletic in both theological *and* contextual terms. Research into the notion of promise in the new hermeneutic has prompted me to wonder whether there is still something retrievable in the new hermeneutic's theological focus on promise as characterizing this Word- or Language Event. Despite the new hermeneutic's many other shortcomings (for me, its intimate tie to existentialism), I suspect this consideration might offer a way forward in our theological assessments of its value. Perhaps what the new hermeneutic offers, when seen as a whole, is more than just "word magic," as Anthony Thiselton contends.²³ Indeed, with a focus on promise, we might well reassess the value of the new homiletic as offering an event of promise given in context. The language of promise was key to Reformation sacramental theologies and opened the door to the disenchantment of the world after the medieval Catholic synthesis. Perhaps a renewed emphasis on promise will disenchant

²⁰ Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (trans. by R. Smith; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 190.

²¹ Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1961), 94–95.

²² Here I am thinking not only of John McClure's discerning reading of the limits of the new homiletic's somewhat reified view of experience in *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 47–66, but also the successive ways of increasingly perspectival approaches to preaching represented in moves toward personal wagers, testimony, and confession with colleagues like Lucy Rose, Anna Carter Florence, and David Lose respectively.

²³ Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 337.

homiletics from its “word magic.” This strikes me as a possible theological way forward and a homiletical *desideratum* for future research.

Promise in Neo-Barthian Homiletical Theologies

In contemporary homiletical theology promise has continued to play a role. This was aided in part by the shift to theological and theo-ethical concerns as the new homiletic’s influence began to wane in the early 1990s. One theological trend was led by postliberal and neo-Barthian homileticians.

Paul Scott Wilson

In this group, the language of promise tended to surface in replicating in particular the more dialectical side of promise language in what Paul Wilson calls the deep grammar or structure of trouble/grace.²⁴ In the tradition of a discussion that runs back in our literature as far back as Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine* (Book III.33), the point is the clear distinction of promise from law as a means of articulating gospel.

Richard Lischer

A particularly interesting development among the postliberal and neo-Barthian homileticians is found in Richard Lischer’s article, “Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise” (1988). Here Lischer holds to a classic, dialectical view of promise in terms of gospel and law, yet also engages the interest in form by the then regnant new homileticians.²⁵ He argues in part that the (then) predominant interest in form should at least be informed itself by a theology and rhetoric of the gospel as promise. What makes the article exciting is that he pushes beyond the purely dialectical understanding of promise (recall also the critique of the truncated view of promise in Barth and Bultmann) to a view that takes the relation of promise to future hope seriously. Here, from the postliberal/neo-Barthian side we see the beginnings of an unexpected opening to the world and its own desire for hope in the midst of suffering and oppression.

James Kay

In a more recent development in homiletical theology, James Kay takes up the issue of promise in his book *Preaching and Theology*.²⁶ In part his book is a reclamation of the notion of the gospel, which he links explicitly to the good news of Jesus’ cross and resurrection, in connection to an enactment of the gospel in the conveying of promise—that is the joining of the *fides quae* (the content of faith) with the *fides qua* (the trusting relationship by which we have faith). Thus Kay connects his interest in classic understandings of the kerygma with the role of promise as a kind of speech act. Here, Kay is drawing from recent developments in theology and philosophy. One important influence is Christopher Morse’s interpretation of Moltmann’s notion of promise in his *Theology of Hope* around the question: What linguistically constitutes a “promise”? In the background, therefore, also lie philosophical partners in analytical philosophy

²⁴ An excellent summary of this and its connection to various figures in homiletics is found in Paul Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching: Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 160–83.

²⁵ Richard Lischer, “Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise,” *Word and World* 8:1 (1988), 66–79.

²⁶ James Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007).

and speech-act theory.²⁷ Other theological partners for Kay's work include Ronald Thiemann, who following Morse's reading of Moltmann, argues for a cultural-linguistic understanding of "promissory narration."²⁸ This is to say for Kay that promise stands in a central theological role in rendering the narrative of scripture—it is then both telling and "address," through which, in the form of promise, God becomes the subject of preaching.

Possible Sources for Future Neo-Barthian Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Further work in the field of linguistic philosophy may aid the development of postliberal and neo-Barthian understandings of promise.²⁹ Along similar lines, a German Lutheran evangelical-catholic theologian, likewise drawing on Austin and Searle's speech-act theory, has placed a theology of promise at the center of his work: Oswald Bayer.³⁰ At the same time, there may be broader implications of these theological and philosophical developments. Here the language of promise opens connections, through speech-act theory and views of promises as "self-involving" illocutionary speech, to a deeper sense of promise as God's commissive speech—a form of speech not bound to ordinary senses of reference and correspondence, but referring back to the divine speaker of that promise and the new situation that arises from that speech act. Here I also sense possible echoes with Paul Wilson's *Setting Words on Fire*. It occurred to me as I read the section on proclamatory statements in section V that this kind of reflection on promise could aid in describing this very type of proclamation that Wilson identifies so convincingly in his research.

Promise in Postmodern Homiletical Theologies

Another great turn in our field since the new homiletic has been represented by those who relate homiletical theology to constructive or deconstructive forms of postmodernism. Here the language of promise has played a less significant role. At the same time, the openness to dialogue with various philosophical sources makes this an area of great potential for promise.

David Lose

In the literature, the chief representative of this view has been David Lose. For Lose, promise plays an important role in developing a postmodern way of talking about the importance of the Biblical canon in line with Lose's vision of preaching as confession. As he develops this approach, Lose talks about the idea of the gospel as promise by drawing connections to the

²⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) and John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²⁸ R. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985).

²⁹ One example is Donald Evans' *The Logic of Self-involvement; a philosophical study of everyday language with special reference to the Christian use of language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963). He explores not just what language says but does with respect to divine self-involvement in illocutionary speech like promises.

³⁰ O. Bayer tends to pursue his questions as a Luther scholar within a liturgical evangelical-catholic perspective, see *Theology the Lutheran Way* (J. G. Silcock and M. C. Mattes, Ed. And Trans.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 125ff. See also his treatment of *promissio* in great detail in his *Habilitationsschrift* of the same name, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971). A forthcoming doctoral thesis by Allan Rudy-Froese, whose engaging work under Paul Wilson on Bayer's understanding of promise is key, deals with historic Mennonite concerns for ethics and Lutheran concerns for grace in preaching. Similar theological interests in promise that dovetail conversationally with this school include Robert Jenson's *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

philosophical literature cited above: speech-act theory, promise language as commissive and self-involving, etc.³¹ While most scholars use this language as a means of doing linguistic analysis, discovering the “use” of such language as promise, Lose brings these theories to bear on a broader theological issue: an exploration of how the Bible as a whole can function as Word of God in a postmodern context.³² The idea for Lose is that we respond differently to the illocutionary force of a text (say, a promise) when we sense that it is asserting some sort of truth claim. His postmodern view of the Bible as Word of God hinges ultimately on the perspectival nature of confession and the assertive nature of discourse. The language of promise in part allows him to pursue a way of thinking about the language of scripture that embraces perspective while holding to an assertive sense about divine truth that goes beyond mere solipsism. It embodies in a sense how the scriptures can be understood as functioning as God’s Word of promise consistent with his critical-fidestic postmodern vision. In Lose’s work, there is a desire to draw on theologians and philosophers for whom promise and its illocutionary force are important for developing a thoroughgoing postmodern perspective: Austin, Searle, Evans, and Thiemann are central; but others, like Gerhard Foerde and Nicholas Wolterstorff, also aid him in his work.

Possibilities for Future Postmodern Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Perhaps the next stage here in exploring promise in a pluralistic postmodern context would be to draw on other philosophers who have stretched our understandings of promise. Two figures leap to mind. Hannah Arendt, for example, pushes the concept of promise into the area of public speech and pluralistic human agency. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt talks about how promise offers an island of security in the face of a future that is unpredictable and uncertain. Arendt writes, “without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart...--a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel.”³³ While Arendt’s views of promise are anthropological in nature, they do help us to think about promise with respect to the presence of others in public space. As for the postmodern concern about modern foundationalisms and the language of presence, philosopher Richard Kearney explores the concept of promise with respect to the struggle between purely ontological, foundationalist views of God and the purely eschatological views of postmodernism which endlessly defer the presence of God. Kearney argues for an “onto-eschatological” view in his book *The God Who May Be*.³⁴ Using the language of epiphany from the burning bush narrative of Exodus, he argues that ontological views translate God’s puzzling response, *‘ehyeh ‘asher ‘ehyeh*, as “I am who I am,” a purely ontological God of the foundations. From the standpoint of the endless eschatological deferral of postmodernism, the translation runs “I will be who I will be,” a kind of apophatic view that is ultimately absence. In light of his onto-eschatological view, Kearney himself renders the phrase “I am who I will be.” The shift then talks about God not as simple presence or absence, but as traversing, eschatological presence. It furthermore places that emphasis not on God’s actuality,

³¹ D. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 156–67.

³² Idem., 160ff.

³³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 237.

³⁴ R. Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2001), 20–38.

but God's *possibility*. Clearly Kearney's work could be, well, promising for a postmodern homiletical theology of promise.

Correlational, Contextual, and Liberation Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Finally, I wish here to discuss a broad array of theological literature in our field that makes only interspersed reference to promise per se, but has a deep if perhaps more potential connection to the second sense of promise as hope: the role of eschatology in preaching and its connection to correlational, contextual, practical and liberative theologies of preaching. The rise of these varied approaches to homiletical theology has yielded an interest in making the preaching task more explicitly contextual-theological as it remains open to culture and world.

David Schnasa Jacobsen

In *Kairos Preaching* David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly go to great lengths to talk about the gospel theologically as promise while seeing it in deep relation to context and the situations which prompt gospel speech. In doing so, they see themselves following in the footsteps of Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, whose work is centered in part around the idea that a clear, non-triumphalist understanding of the gospel is intimately linked to its contextualizing for the disestablished, North American churches. In light of this, they view any and all of their reflections on a gospel of promise within the orbit of those theologians who want to see the preaching task in a contextual-theological frame and relate it to matters eschatological.³⁵

Much of the interest in eschatology in other contextual-theological approaches to preaching offers interesting potential points of contact for exploring aspects of a homiletical theology of "promise." Here one thinks in particular about the work of Eunjoo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, and Dale Andrews, all of whom relate an interest in eschatology to their contextual-theological work as homileticians.³⁶

Eunjoo Mary Kim

Kim, for example, places eschatology at the center of her project of a contextual theology of preaching that takes seriously Asian spirituality's concern for critical transcendence. She writes: "The struggle between the powers of good and evil, the universal reign of the one true God, and the message of comfort with hope and promise for the future to the faithful in their times of most bitter suffering are its major concerns.... The expectation of the future is now grounded in the promise of God, the second coming of Christ."³⁷

Kenyatta Gilbert

Kenyatta Gilbert, in his practical-theological agenda for trivocal African-American preaching touches on the importance of promise for his own homiletical-theological vision: "A

³⁵ In their book, Jacobsen and Kelley acknowledge that they do not always agree, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 12–13, 32–35! The ways they relate gospel as promise to context and situation are sketched out in chapters 1–3. The connection of the same to eschatology is covered on pp. 18–19.

³⁶ Dale Andrews argues eschatology is one of the four key elements for preaching within a Black ecclesiology of refuge in "Ecclesiology, Preaching and Pastoral Care in the African American Church Tradition," in *Collected Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (1997), 12–21.

³⁷ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999), 60.

good sermon is a theological conversation about what it means to speak of a promise-bearing God who addresses the real needs of real people.”³⁸

Dale P. Andrews

Dale Andrews aims to reconcile Black liberationist and survivalist/refuge approaches to suffering and oppression. He writes: “Survival may in fact be part of humanity’s proactive participation in the redemptive activity of God. It is, rather, God’s promise in Jesus Christ to work redemptively even in suffering.”³⁹ As he seeks to place eschatology at the center of his ecclesial vision as a way of reconciling this-worldly and other-worldly perspectives, Andrews notes: “The culmination of salvation history in the Kingdom of Heaven ultimately fulfills the gospel promise of complete freedom for the African slaves and early free blacks. Eschatology is the theological vision of that hope...; otherworldly promise translates into this-worldly hope and ways of being.”⁴⁰

Ron Allen and Joey Jeter

One other pair of homileticians whose work sees preaching as just such a theological task, but also do connect briefly their understanding of the gospel to promise are Ron Allen and Joey Jeter in *One Gospel, Many Ears*. Here they articulate the gospel in connection with diverse congregational conversation, yet in this formulation accenting the language of “the promise of the unconditional love of God for each and all, and the command of God for justice for each and all.”⁴¹

Christine Smith

In her development of a liberative homiletical theology, Christine Smith invokes the language of promise to talk about a powerfully eschatological sense of promise joined to life lived now. In her edited volume, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (1998), Smith uses the language of Ezekiel 34 to envision and create a “promised place” for marginalized gay and lesbian persons.⁴² In the deconstructive and constructive work of such a liberative homiletical theology, Smith says, “...we may just find God’s incarnation power in ways we have never been able to imagine. In this world, where gender ceases to rule and heterosexism ceases to control, God’s promise...might well become a promise for us all.” Smith continues this emphasis in her work, *Risking the Terror*, where she links it with a liberation perspective on the resurrection. In part building on the radical critique of the web of oppression in *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*, Smith returns to the prophetic task of justice preaching with a desire to name God more fully by means of resurrection’s promise: “...I found myself urgently turning to the possibility of resurrection as that promise in the Christian faith that is strong enough to counteract and transform death itself.... As a practical theologian and preacher, I needed new language, new images, and new understandings that would enable me to be a more faithful proclaimer of God’s resurrection life.”⁴³ Smith’s vision of promise in

³⁸ Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 80.

³⁹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), 46.

⁴⁰ Idem., 47.

⁴¹ Ron Allen and Joey Jeter, *One Gospel, Many Ears* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 10.

⁴² Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 144.

⁴³ Smith, *Risking the Terror*, 1.

the resurrection blurs the line between divine and human agency by locating it incarnationally in the people of God now: “As eschatological vision, the people of God seek to articulate, proclaim, and embody the hope of shalom, the promise of healing and restoration, the transforming reality of God’s saving justice and love.”⁴⁴ And yet the promise is itself rooted in the resurrected Jesus that offer the promise that helps us claim the power of the resurrection among us.⁴⁵ Of course, it is not about Jesus alone; the reign of God is an “overarching vision” that expresses what God “desires and promises” and to such a degree that it gives us a glimpse of God’s “ultimate promise.”⁴⁶

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm

Wilhelm places promise at the center of her homiletical theology of prophetic preaching.⁴⁷ Whereas so much prophetic preaching runs the risk of forgetting divine agency, Wilhelm seeks to locate human and ecclesial engagement within the purposes of a sovereign God. Drawing in part on Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of the prophetic imagination and its connection to a community with an alternative consciousness, Wilhelm places the issue of prophetic preaching within the countercultural witness of Anabaptist communities as part of an overarching vision of God’s passion and God’s promises which *ground* our possibilities for prophetic engagement. Prophetic preaching’s proclamation of the promises of God functions for Wilhelm in two key ways. First, doing so recalls the One who promises. This recalls all God’s people to their identity in God.⁴⁸ God is the source of justice, love, and the very reign to which the promise points. Second, in speaking of the promises of God we invoke the futurity of God’s realm. Wilhelm notes, “...the prophetic preacher who is passionate about God’s Word in the world is not simply concerned with renunciation of evil but listens for God’s promises echoing in every generation and relates instances of faith, hope, and love as they are found in the church and world. As surely as sin is at work among us, so are the promises of God and the prophetic preacher is responsible for identifying and naming the ways in which God’s intended future is realized in the present.”⁴⁹ In this way, the promises already begin to invoke the future of God.

Olin Moyd

Moyd’s practical-theological vision of a theology of preaching in *The Sacred Art* also appeals to promise. Moyd wishes to make clear that there is a deep connection in the African American tradition between salvation from sin *and* the “hope for freedom, justice, and redemption,” a connection which embodies this tradition’s commitment to the “whole counsel of God.”⁵⁰ Moyd continues: “Preaching the whole counsel included the telling and retelling of biblical incidents of God’s self-revelation in human history and God’s promise and plan for

⁴⁴ Idem., 10.

⁴⁵ Idem., 67.

⁴⁶ Idem., 73.

⁴⁷ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, “God’s Word in the World,” 76–93.

⁴⁸ Idem., 87.

⁴⁹ Idem., 88. Despite the reliance on Brueggemann’s countercultural categories, I have placed Wilhelm’s work on promise here rather than among the post-liberals in the neo-Barthian camp above. Her view of promise is open to its “echoes” as well as evocations and naming both in the church and world, and thus breaks open the exclusively ecclesial orientation of the postliberal options.

⁵⁰ Moyd, *The Sacred Art*, 53.

continued involvement in the redemption of his people.”⁵¹ The role of promise, says Moyd, extends to the core of the gospel itself: “The mission of the preacher is to be the bearer of the gospel—the Good News of redemption.... [P]reaching always included a message of exhortation and promise—guidance and hope.”⁵² Moyd continues this line of thought as he thinks about eschatology, God’s redemptive and liberative purposes, God’s activity and our participation. Exhortation and promise belong together: “Exhortation was the calling upon the people and the nation to adjust and to readjust their lives spiritually and socially in order to achieve a just society. And promise meant preaching hope for the inbreaking of a just society—the coming into genuine confederation and community of the people of God.”⁵³ It is this, says Moyd, that gives preaching its capacity for empowerment and motivation.

It is important to note that a theology of promise here is only sometimes at the center of these disparate correlational, liberation, contextual- or practical-theological projects. What one does see in this literature, however, is a way of embracing the language of promise that draws deeply from its historically neglected eschatological sense. In some cases, it does so by drawing deeply as well on the connection of promise to the presence of the One who promises, too—a key notion shared by the older dialectical tradition.

Conclusion

This essay as *Forschungsbericht* has ranged widely through the literature of contemporary homiletics. It has sought to set out the many different ways that homiletical theologians connect promise to their work. My hope is that such an exploration of the many aspects of a homiletical theology of promise might bear fruit in new research problems and trajectories. Clearly many colleagues have already begun to develop new ways of thinking about how promise can give theological specificity and depth to the task of reflecting on the language of preaching, the scriptures, the relationship of future and present, the importance of grace and divine presence, and the relationship of homiletical-theological work to sacramental theology. My intention is to focus new research in this direction, with a view to taking up its unfinished theological task. The hope is that this research report provokes renewed conversation and thoughts around prospects for a more integrative homiletical theology that is open even now to redeeming the promise of promise.

⁵¹ Idem., 55.

⁵² Idem., 57.

⁵³ Idem., 121–22.