

Oswald Bayer. *Promissio: The Reformational Turn in Luther's Theology*. Translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock. Fortress Press, 2025. 464 pages. \$59.99.

Oswald Bayer's scholarship on Luther has long focused on centering the notion of promise as the preeminent marker of the "Reformational turn" in his theology. His first book *Promissio*, having undergone a few editions since, was actually the product of Bayer's *Habilitation* writing decades ago in German. Since then, English speaking scholars have made do with translations of Bayer's subsequent works on Luther over the years (*Martin Luther's Theology*, 2008; *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 2017; and *Living by Faith*, 2017). But with Jeffrey Silcock's new and helpful translation of *Promissio*, Bayer's earliest wrestling with Luther is now more readily available to English readers.

Why should homileticians and preachers care about yet another work in the history of theology about Luther? At the heart of Bayer's thesis is the notion is that what truly shapes the Reformation is Luther's focus on God's promise given in the external word of preaching as a kind of effective sign. In Bayer's later publications, he adds sections where he links this notion of *promissio* to contemporary works by Austin and Searle on Speech Act Theory, which seeks to get beyond a constative understanding of words to get at their illocutionary and perlocutionary effects. But here in this new translation of Bayer's *Promissio* from 1971, this Reformational turn is understood chiefly through a constructive lens: a promise causes something to be and is not just a linguistic *signum* separated from its more important *res*.

It may be that Bayer's work is important for homileticians and preachers who have grown weary of the inflated claims of the so-called New Homiletic that tried to dress up its high theology of the Word in Heideggerean philosophy and the Post-Bultmannian theologies of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling. Our own recent struggles with such high claims for language and ontology have been empowered by critical theories of race and gender and more carefully wrought, thoroughly contextualized ways of limiting and relativizing the kinds of language we imagine are germane to early twenty-first century homiletics.

Yet this is precisely why a close reading of this new translation of Bayer's reading of Luther can be so valuable. Luther was not just some prematurely Modern figure towering over time but somehow not embodied and rooted *in* his late Medieval context. To the contrary, Bayer's interest in what makes Luther's turn to promise significant for the emerging Reformation is deeply shaped by Luther's late Medieval context, the theological options of the day, and above all a painful struggle with the sacrament of penance and its relationship to the spiritual practices that ran deep in Luther's own mind and body. The genius of Bayer's work is the way he describes in slow motion the painfully wrought changes of mind and conviction between 1514 and 1520 that make possible later works like *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of the Christian*. Bayer doesn't rehearse the story of Luther's insight about "promise" as some acontextual, inevitable victory, but as a struggle realized in fits and starts, and even by 1520, still conflicted and ambiguous.

The succession of chapters makes this plain. The struggle for Luther begins with a sermon from 1517 and the Old Testament professor's connection of his study of the scriptures with the penitential psalms in Part I (chapters 1-3). Part II (chapters 4-12) begins to identify key ways in which Luther shifts from his prior approach clearly suited to a monastic view of Christ "in the psalms" helping the spiritual reader to become aware of judgment and the need in salvation to appropriate the cross and suffering in one's life as the place where grace and salvation become active, even if that salvation is ambiguous and unsure. And it is this ambiguity

here that centers Bayer's important insight: what emerges out of Luther's early writing is not a dash toward the righteousness of God in Romans 3, but a deep reflection on the sacrament of penance itself and how its promise of absolution works. Luther's hard-won insight about the role of promise in absolution, of course, eventuates in ever more fulsome appreciations of how promise actually shapes first the Lord's Supper (chapter 6) and later Baptism (chapter 7), reforms his view of how the scriptures should be read meditatively (chapter 8) and the basis of prayer (chapter 10), and only then begins to ground Luther's view of preaching and the role of the Word of God. Along the way, the reader of Bayer's *Promissio* sees the real spiritual and theological struggle that Luther undergoes as he reflects on the role of the promise of absolution for penance and the sea change that only slowly effects its changes to Luther's thinking and praxis.

For my part, it makes no sense to recapitulate the heroic tendencies long enshrined in our understandings of the Reformers and their high regard for the Word of God over against the medieval synthesis. That is the path of cultural hegemony and only justifies forms of domination that still haunt us today. Bayer's take on Luther's reformational insight on promise, however, embraces the struggle and embodies the conflict in Luther's own life and the emergence of hard-won insight. For those of us who even now *struggle* with promise at the gates of hell, in the hauntings of colonial histories, and in the midst of exclusion and injustice, Bayer's *Promissio* allows readers to press toward a more critical appreciation of Luther's notion and how it might still hold value for us today.

David Schnasa Jacobsen, Bishops Scholar Emeritus in Homiletics and Preaching, Boston
University School of Theology, Boston, MA