

Gregory Walter. *Being Promised: Theology, Gift, and Practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. 110 pages. \$18.75.

Theologian Gregory Walter aims to answer the question: “What is this promise that is the gospel of Jesus?” In doing so, he also seeks to frame the question in a decidedly non-foundationalist way. Yet he does not pursue it in purely confessional terms, but brings the theological language of promise into public conversations as well. For this reason, he traverses theology, cultural anthropology, and speech-act theory, too. The result is a fascinating attempt to envision a theology of promise in post-metaphysical terms, namely as gift practice.

Walter does this work through five chapters. The first places his contribution at this point of intersection between promise, speech acts, and theories and practices of gifts. The deep connection between promise and gift is explicated in chapter 2 (this is where Abraham, Sarah and the three visitors make a cameo). Chapter 3 is devoted to the weak power that promise represents. Here Walter connects such weak power to the work of the Spirit at Pentecost: a present gift *and* future promise that opens possibility. In chapter 4 Walter deals with the impure gift. The language of gift and conditionality opens up a Derridean problem of the gift’s purity—a relationship that Walter wishes to transform. In a fifth and final chapter, Walter turns to the Eucharist as the “place” of promise. Here he draws on the narrative of the Last Supper to help promise take place at the close.

In one sense, the audience for this work is probably not the Academy of Homiletics. Those accompanying Walter through his five-chapter work are chiefly contemporary theologians like Moltmann, Jenson, Pannenberg, and Bayer. Because Walter is so doggedly public in orientation, he wishes to press beyond the link between promise and speech-act theory, an analytical-philosophical move, to consider gift *practices* and cultural-anthropological theories of gift giving. This takes him into the company of theoreticians like Mauss, Malinowski, and Derrida—all of whom have deepened conversation around gift as practice. His thesis is that promise participates in and yet interrupts the conditionality and obligation of gift exchanges, not by obliterating them (e.g., Derrida’s unconditional, pure gift), but *transforming* them. Promise, in other words, pries open the practice of gift exchange and offers a new space for living toward a future in freedom. He demonstrates this beautifully in his close reading of the three strange visitors to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. Sarah’s laughter is occasioned by the incommensurability of the visitors’ feeble promise in response to Abraham’s lavish hospitality *and* the possible impossibility of a son that the disproportionate promise offers. The normal round of threat-reducing gift exchange in desert hospitality has been broken open toward an incredulous rejection *and* making transformation possible in the promise.

And yet in another sense, the audience of this work *is* the Academy of Homiletics. The importance of promise in contemporary homiletical-theological reflection cannot be gainsaid. Homileticians like Eunjoon Mary Kim, Dale Andrews, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Christine Smith, and Kenyatta Gilbert allude to promise as a way of speaking of its eschatological, prophetic power in situations of suffering. Homileticians like James Kay, David Lose, Paul Wilson, Richard Lischer, and Allan Rudy-Froese want to link promise deeply to the scriptures, its narrative, and/or to the gospel itself. Here Walter pushes the homiletical conversation into greater depth by placing promise at the fruitful intersection of theology, culture, and practice. The results of this study hold together elements of promise that homileticians sometimes hold

apart: promise as an intra-ecclesial confessional matter and promise as an eschatological reality that both includes and transforms cultures, and perhaps even publics.

As a devotee of promise in my own work as a homiletical theologian, I recommend the book highly. Homileticians will find Walter's work useful to press our work more deeply especially since it calls forth a more sturdy and tensive contextualization of promise. My only real criticism of the book would be the connection between chapters 1–4 and 5. The final chapter seems almost an afterthought. As promise shapes both theologies of Word and Sacrament, it need not be quite so difficult to negotiate this move.

My hope is that Walter's promising work will engender a transformative conversation in our field as well. By refusing to leave promise in a kind of Barthian tangential relationship to world and culture, Walter invites us to pursue our work as homiletical theologians in ways both more rigorous and more gifted than before.

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