

*Promissio: The Reformational Turn in Luther's Theology.* By Oswald Bayer. Translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025. 464 pp.

One of the most important and illuminating works of modern Luther scholarship is now available in English, thanks to Fortress Press, Lutheran Quarterly Books, and Jeffrey Silcock, who has been translating Bayer's writings for many years now with the author's active cooperation. This book, which combines Bayer's doctoral dissertation and *Habilitation* thesis, is his fundamental contribution to Luther research and the basis of his later work in systematic theology and ethics. This publication in English comes to us with a new preface and retrospective afterword by Bayer, as well as a translator's preface.

Bayer's method is modeled on New Testament historical criticism, supported by close literary reading of selected texts carefully situated in historical context. Rather than a broad, quasi-Hegelian history where a key idea unfolds with a kind of inevitability over time, Bayer offers painstaking exegesis of a relatively small number of texts in which Luther is working out key insights that came as a surprise to him—including the insight that earlier scholars called his “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*) and Bayer calls his “reformational turn” (*reformatatorische Wende*).

The gold standard for what counts as reformational in Bayer's presentation is the correlation of promise and faith in the *Babylonian Captivity* (1520). The profound originality of Bayer's research is his recognition that Luther's new conception of faith was brought about by his discovery of the concept of promise, not the other way round. We have the doctrine of justification by faith alone because Luther came to a new understanding of the promise of God when he was writing about the sacrament of penance in the course of the indulgence controversy in 1518. The concept of Christ's word giving what it promises, which Luther first discovered in the sacramental word of absolution authorized by Matthew 16:19, became the basis of his theology of word and sacrament as well as his reformational distinction between law and gospel. Thus—and quite strikingly—the ensuing battle with the papacy is ignited by Luther's *intensification* of the Catholic notion of the sacramental efficacy of the means of grace, which now demands and bestows the unambiguous certainty that God in Christ is gracious to me in particular because of the word of promise that addresses me in the sacrament.

The promise as “gifting word” (*Gabewort*) comes to be at the heart of Luther's understanding of preaching and prayer and is especially prominent when he foregrounds the words of institution promising us that Christ himself is “given for you” in the Lord's Supper. The word that gives what it says offers Luther (and Bayer) an alternative to other forms of spirituality, including: a spiritualistic Augustinian hermeneutics that separates outward signs and the inward presence of the thing signified (*signum* and *res*) and finds

salvation only in the latter; medieval practices of scriptural meditation downstream from Augustine in which the mind is instructed to transcend the words of the text to experience the divine truth it signifies; a distinctively late-medieval form of meditation espoused by the early Luther, in which contemplation of Christ's passion should drive us to inward penitence, humiliation, and self-hatred; and, the modern fashion, originating in twentieth-century German scholarship, of locating Luther's breakthrough in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) and its "theology of the cross," which does not promise us good things but functions to kill us.

I can attest to the fact that this large, very scholarly book may change a reader's life. It will be most treasured by those for whom study has become a form of devotional life. To study Luther with Bayer can be a way of studying the word of God with Luther, and good things can come of that.

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