

## SALVATION AND SPEECH ACT. READING LUTHER WITH THE AID OF SEARLE'S ANALYSIS OF DECLARATIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** Many Luther scholars have made passing reference to Martin Luther's theology of the Word as a 'speech-act' theology. This essay aims to probe points of continuity and discontinuity between Luther's understanding of the Word, as exemplified in the promise of God, and a particular speech-act philosophy as posited by John Searle. The analysis of Searle in the area of declarations, as well as a survey of Lutheran conceptions of the Word of promise in both sacrament and Scripture, will evidence specific moments of clarity in Luther's so-called 'speech-act' theology and provide a helpful paradigm for viewing the creative impact of the Word as conceived by Luther.

**KEY WORDS:** Martin Luther, John Searle, speech-act, Word of God, promise

### Introduction

Not long after John Searle published *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* in 1969, theologians began to take up the practice of speech-act analysis as it corresponds to Scripture and to the broader understanding of divine speech (Thiselton 1970; Vanhoozer 1986; Botha 2007). The fruits of this effort have helped theologians and faith communities reimagine what it means for the church to be addressed by the Word of God in a post-biblicist, post-Augustinian framework that, as Kevin Vanhoozer asserts, 'opens up possibilities for transformative reading that the modern obsession with information has eclipsed' (Vanhoozer 2001: 6). Vanhoozer has consistently defended the usefulness of speech-act philosophy in theology by pointing out that the primary thrust of speech-act philosophy—that human speech

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*does* something—is an essential conviction shared by the ancient authors of the New Testament.

Martin Luther, the great theologian of the German Reformation, also identified language as an active, creative entity. His approach to the hermeneutical question warrants attention, for it emphasizes the unique nature of God's speech in Scripture and, ultimately, through Christ, as reality-creating speech; through the law, it kills, and through the gospel, it brings to new life. The life-creating power of the Word was expressed in particular through the divine promise—a promise that creates *ex nihilo* (Kolb 2009: 70). This finds a level of correspondence with the way John Searle applies the declarative power of the spoken promise, a sub-category of what he refers to as a performative. In this study, we will seek to briefly outline Searle's work in the arena of performatives and then seek to observe (broadly) Searle's position as a means of illuminating Luther's emphasis on the *promissio* of God in Christ. Finally, we shall reflect on the implications of the speech-act emphasis in Luther's theology for current interpretive communities.

### **Searle's Illocutionary Acts**

John Searle has dedicated over forty years to development and examination within the arena of speech-act theory. He stands in the tradition of language theorists such as Wittgenstein, Grice, and, most immediately, J. L. Austin of Oxford. One of Searle's particular concerns has been to expound upon the essential connection between the mind and linguistic communication by attempting to show that language arises out of a concept of intentionality. Intentionality refers to the 'property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world' (Searle 1983: 1). That is, intentionality expresses the reality that mental states are often pointed or 'directed' toward something or someone (Searle 1983: 1).

Grice spoke similarly of separating the meaning of a sentence from the meaning of the speaker; in this separation, one must give primacy to the speaker meaning—the intentions of the speaker are of first importance (Searle 2001: 174). Language is derived from intentionality, and this has particular significance in the occasion of speech-act theory: directedness grounds speech acts, such that 'the performance of [a] speech act is necessarily an expression of the corresponding Intentional state...' (Searle 2001: 5, 9). It follows, then, that any speech act betrays the intention of the speaker, or intender. Statements follow beliefs. But this may be putting the cart in front of the horse. To what does Searle refer when he appeals to the notion of speech acts?

Searle posits that to speak is to perform an action, something that *does something* in the world. Understanding the way language works is essential,

and Searle sees his exercise as particularly timely in light of the shortcomings of popular (Augustinian) ideas about the role of language:

All linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act. To take the token as a message is to take it as a produced or issued token. More precisely, the production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions is the speech act, and speech acts (of certain kinds to be explained later) are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication (Searle 1969: 16).

The ability to communicate effectively rises and falls on the issuance of speech acts. This issuance is expressed in an illocutionary act; that is, an utterance which employs a reference and a predication in a particular manner to perform a certain task (Searle 1969: 23). The differentiation between acts depends not exclusively on the words employed, but on the intention of the speaker in directing a particular illocutionary act over against a myriad of others. Searle gives this example (Searle 1969: 22-23):

1. Sam smokes habitually.
2. Does Sam smoke habitually?
3. Sam, smoke habitually!
4. Would that Sam smoked habitually.

Each of these statements employs the same referent (Sam) and predication (smoking habitually), but these represent very different speech acts: asserting, questioning, commanding, and expressing desire. Searle proposes five basic 'performances of illocutionary acts': 'We tell people how things are (Assertives), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations)' (Searle 1985: 29; Williams-Tinajero 2011: 17).

To what end are speech acts performed? Searle's speech-act theory adopts Austin's concept of *perlocutionary act* (Searle 1969: 25). This is what an illocutionary act does to or for the hearer. Thus, in the act of an order, one may be moved to do what is ordered. In arguing, one may be persuaded. If the illocution achieves the perlocution corresponding to the speaker's intentionality, the 'conditions of satisfaction' are met; the speech act has performed its intended function (Searle 1983: 12). Declarations are of a special category, because these performances enact a change in the world purely by essence of the declaration's successful utterance.

For instance, the phrase ‘I pronounce you man and wife’, when performed successfully within the necessary criteria (as outlined below), under the appropriate rules for the employ of the particular declaration, constitutes a change or a creation of reality not only in the man and woman as referents, but in the world which these individuals inhabit: ‘successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world: if I successfully perform the act of appointing you chairman, then you are chairman... if I successfully perform the act of declaring a state of war, then war is on...’ (Searle 1985: 17). What circumstances constitute the right conditions for a successful declaration? Clearly, it must depend on more than the right words spoken in the right manner (although this criterion is certainly necessary). Searle introduces four features which indicate declarations (Searle 1989: 548):

1. An extra-linguistic institution,
2. A special position by the speaker, and sometimes the hearer, within the institution,
3. A special convention that certain literal sentences of natural languages count as the performances of certain declarations within the institution,
4. The intention by the speaker in the utterance of those sentences that his utterance has a declarations status, that it creates a fact corresponding to the propositional content.

Promises are understood by Searle in a similar manner, yet distinctions exist. The difference between a promise on the one hand and a declaration of war or a pronouncement of marriage on the other is that promises create *linguistic facts*. Linguistic declarations such as promises and orders do not rest on the conditions of extra-linguistic structures outlined above. The performance of a promise stands on its own reality; the promise is created in its speaking (Searle 1989: 549). Additionally, and relevant to our discussion, Searle does not see supernatural declarations (i.e., ‘Let there be light!’) as conditioned on extra-linguistic institutions (although the other three criteria are assumed as necessary). Searle, in *Speech Acts*, presents nine conditions necessary for a promise to obtain and five rules; the rules for a performative promise are as follows (Searle 1969: 63): (1) A promise is to be spoken only in the context of a sentence, the speaking of which predicates a future act of the speaker; (2) A promise is spoken only if the hearer wishes for the speaker to fulfill the act, *and* if the speaker believes the hearer would prefer the act to be done over against not doing it; (3) A promise is spoken only if it is not obvious to the speaker and the hearer that the speaker would not do the act under normal circumstances; (4) A promise is spoken only if the speaker intends to do the act (the *sincerity rule*); (5) A promise counts as the undertaking of an obligation of the speaker to do the act.

Under these conditions a promise is understood to be enacted. Promises are inherently projected onto the expectation of a future fulfillment: 'In a promise an act must be predicated of the speaker and it cannot be a past act. I cannot promise to have done something' (Searle 1969: 57). Furthermore, promises are, by nature, positive performances; that is to say, Searle understands promises exclusively as *for* the hearer. A promise of something which the hearer does not want is an unsound promise (Searle 1969: 58). Finally, it is necessary to distinguish between the promise-declarative and an assertive that a promise has been made. For instance, 'I hereby promise to you, Tom, that I will do *x*' is declarative; it creates the reality of a promise in its very stating. On the other hand, 'Jim promised to do *x* for Tom' is an assertive; it asserts the truth of a proposition. Notice that both have the same referent (Tom) and predication (promise). Both are speech acts. But only the direct, literal promise is properly understood as a declarative.

Searle's research helps to outline a basic apprehension of the way that declarations (specifically promises) as performative acts work in the world. To summarize, Searle approaches language through the lens of illocutionary performance; that is to say, he believes that speaking *does something substantive* as opposed to merely standing in the place of things as they exist in reality. Illocution is grounded in human intentionality, the 'directedness' of certain mental states toward people, objects, or states of affair in the world. Illocutions of declaration are self-referential acts which create new realities by virtue of their being spoken; declarations are creative performances in the sense that they make something exist which did not formally exist. The creative force of declarations serves as an anchor point whereby we may examine Luther's approach to God's Word as a performance.

Luther's understanding of the Word arose out of theological and pastoral concerns and in the context of the post-nominalist framework of sixteenth century Europe—clearly, he did not think of language in Searlean terms. Nevertheless, his commitment to God's Word as an essentially creative and performative phenomenon suggests a vital, if only broad, connection between Searle's assertion—that language has the ability to create a new state of affairs in its speaking—and what Luther believed the Word of God does. Taking this vantage point, we can negotiate the implications of Searle's reality of language for Luther's hermeneutical perspective, and then assess the viability of such an approach for current faith communities by evaluating the usefulness of speech-act theory in theological discourse.

### **Luther, the 'promissio' and the 'verbum efficax'**

#### *Luther and Promise. The Reformational Turn*

An examination of Martin Luther's understanding of the believer and the Word must address the nature of Luther's so-called 'reformation discovery'.

Much ink has been spilled disputing the exact nature of Luther's discovery—when it happened and what constituted the change of understanding that began Luther's emphasis on the sufficiency of faith. Luther himself wrote concerning the moment wherein his interpretation of faith was consciously reoriented: 'I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' that had stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God'...' (Luther 1965a: 336-337). Luther had been taught to understand God's righteousness as God's utter holiness which issues in the punishment of sinners, but after wrestling with the text, Luther came to understand God's righteousness in the context of Romans as the righteousness which God gave to the sinner through faith. He comments that after reaching this conclusion, 'There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me... I found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God' (Luther 1965a: 337).

Luther's statements about this moment in his life are pivotal for grasping what the reformer sought to understand and teach about humanity's interaction with God. What stands behind this discovery of Luther's? What are the concurrent (or prior) conditions which assisted Luther in his discovery of imputed righteousness by faith?

Oswald Bayer, an influential voice in contemporary Luther studies, has traced a development in Luther that finds its source in Luther's earliest reformational writings: the conviction that the promise of God, the *promissio*, is preeminent in every aspect of faith. In this conviction, Bayer finds abundant evidence to interpret Luther as a theologian of the speech acts of God. Luther's Genesis lectures from 1545 attest the importance of Luther's reorientation from human effort toward the *promissio* of God. Commenting on Jacob's blessing of Ephraim in chapter 48, Luther expounds on the priority of God's promise, which he sees as an essential element to the proper understanding of Christ. He concludes with a testimony of his turn:

For I certainly would have had to perish in that den of robbers (Matthew 21:13) had not I been set free by God. For I knew nothing about the promises and the use of the sacraments...Indeed, I shuddered all over at that word and at the name of our Savior Jesus Christ; for I thought that He had been represented as my Judge, not as my Savior. I admired and respected a priest arrayed in his long vestment or bringing a sacrifice for the living and the dead more than I admired and respected the doctrine concerning Christ together with the promises and the sacraments (Luther 1965b: 188).

According to Luther, his lack of knowledge and teaching about the promises of Christ were a direct result of the veil drawn over the gospel by Catholic dogma. Bayer argues that Luther's confession above, coupled with his theses outlined in a little-known text *Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis* [For the investigation of Truth and for the Comfort of Troubled Consciences] (1518) evidence a key moment in Luther's ever-growing reformational shift (Bayer 2008: 48-49). *Pro veritate* contained Luther's understanding of the promise of God as *the* moment which contains assurance of salvation; Luther thought that the promise of God, the word that gives assurance, was what first 'made one a Christian' (Bayer 2008: 50). Bayer argues that this assertion of Luther's was the Church's decisive point to mark Luther for heresy.

The *promissio* was outlined clearly in Luther's reflection on the sacraments. The sacrament of penance, for instance, depended upon the promise of God as spoken through the Christian. To say, 'I absolve you!' or 'your sins are forgiven' was, for Luther, to speak a fresh ontological status into reality (Bayer 2008: 52). Bayer comments that, contra Augustine, the sign given in absolution was the thing itself; the *signum* was the *res*:

[Absolution] is not a judgment, which merely establishes that something is true already. This would mean that someone could assume that absolution or justification has taken place already, in an inner, divine way for that individual. Instead, in this instance, a speech act actually constitutes a reality, first initiating and creating a relationship—between the one in whose name something is spoken and the one who is addressed and believes that promise. Luther calls this type of speech act *verbum efficax*, that which establishes communication...an effective, accomplishing Word (Bayer 2008: 53).

Luther's attitude toward the sacrament of penance was, quite frankly, a revolution. Absolution, as regarded in the sixteenth century Church and as affirmed by the Council of Trent, depended on a certain mindset, a melancholy associated with awareness of sin which characterized *vera contritio*. Trent's Session XIV, Canon V on the Most Holy Sacrament of Penance states the case clearly: 'If anyone saith, that the contrition which is acquired by means of the examination, collection and detestation of sins—whereby one *thinks over his years in the bitterness of his soul*, by pondering on the grievousness, the multitude, the filthiness of his sins, the loss of eternal blessedness, and the eternal damnation which he has incurred, having therewith the purpose of a better life—is not a true and profitable sorrow, does not prepare for grace... let him be anathema' (Nampon 1869: 517-518, emphasis added).

This being the case, it is apparent how significant doubts could settle into the hearts of parishioners. The fear of spiritual inadequacy leading to



judgment loomed large in the minds of late medieval Christians, and it is into this sea of doubt and self-questioning that Luther speaks (Hamm 2004: 89-90). His instruction for lay people, 'The Sacrament of Penance' (1519), made clear that God's work was not hidden from the Christian, that there was no need for concern regarding one's own ability, for the work of forgiveness depended solely on the Word of God which constituted forgiveness in its very speaking (Wicks 1984: 61). '[F]orgiveness of guilt, the heavenly indulgence, is granted to no one on account of the worthiness of his contrition over his sins, nor on account of his works of satisfaction, but only on account of his faith in the promise of God, 'Whatever you loose... shall be loosed' etc.' (Luther 1965c: 12). The 'key' of forgiveness was not based on true contrition nor any work of penance, but rather was based on the promise of God delivered to Christians that the word of forgiveness declared by the confessor over the sinner would be God's speech over her as well (Rittgers 2009: 223).

Notice the formula that Luther presents: the promise of forgiveness given in Scripture but spoken in the moment for the parishioner by another constitutes a declaration *by God*. The declaration in itself is similar to what John Searle has outlined in his work on speech acts. Searle posits that a complete speech act, or a satisfaction of the declarative, stands purely by virtue of its issuance under the right circumstances. In the case of absolution of sin, Luther understands the right conditions to be God's promise to the Church in Scripture. As a divine promise, it may be examined within Searle's category of 'supernatural declaration' not conditioned upon extralinguistic institutions. Such a universal declaration is important for Luther, for he understands the 'keys' of absolution as God's investment of authority in the common Christian, available to all without formal sacerdotal institution (Luther 1965c: 17).

Divine promises differ from those of humans, for God's promises do not create merely *linguistic facts*, as Searle proposed human promises do. God's promise creates an ontological fact, a change in being. In the full scope of the Word, the promise is nothing other than Christ himself, such that to believe God's promise, 'I absolve you of your sins!', in the moment of confession is to direct one's belief to the Word of the promise, that is, to Christ. The words of the promise must be clear, for where obscurity lingers the gift may not be received (Thompson 2004: 208-210). Luther presses this plainly in his exposition of the Lord's Supper, where he sees the words of institution ('This is my body') as a promise of testament, i.e., a conferring of gifts and benefits to be received upon the death of the testator (Thompson 2004: 210). The words are important, for they convey with clarity the will of the speaker, namely, the Lord Jesus. Similarly, Searle's eighth rule for a promise conditions a satisfactory promise upon the intention of the speaker 'to pro-



duce a certain illocutionary effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to proceed that effect...' (Searle 1969: 61). Thus, the words of institution clearly spoken serve as the performative which the hearer will recognize *as a promise*, thereby knowing the intention of God to confer his blessing through the promise.

An inescapable question remains. If one regards Luther as correct in his connection of sacrament to promise to Word, what are the implications for Luther's understanding of Scripture? The words of institution in the sacrament, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'buried with Christ in baptism' or 'This is my body, broken for you' are, after all, expressions of the written word of Scripture; they are words of history, words of the past, words on the page. Searle states definitively that a promise 'must be predicated of the speaker and it cannot be a past act. I cannot promise to have done something' (Searle 1969: 57). If this is so, it would seem to negate the feasibility of Scripture-shaped promises as performance. How can declarations performed once for past hearers be understood as God's performative Word in *this* moment for *my ears*? Can old promises create new realities, or are modern readers of Scripture ever and only second-hand observers of a bygone promise?

#### *Luther's application of the 'promissio' in Scripture*

Luther's approach to Scripture was shaped under the conviction that God's self-revelation was personal in nature; specifically, he was convinced that the relationship between God and man was inescapably one of Speaker and listener (*tu esto auditor et ego ero predicator*) (Lindhardt 1986: 98-99). This speaker/listener relationship permeates all aspects of revelation, such that any knowledge of God was imparted through the Word, whether written, spoken, or enfleshed. These three distinctions of the Word were not at odds in Luther's mind, because in all instances the living Christ as the Word is the prime point to which our ears are oriented. The Word written and spoken are God's Word indeed, but they are vehicles for the Spirit to bring the hearer to the incarnate Word (Thompson 2004: 82).

This conception of the Word as the moment between God, the Speaker and a human, the hearer, flows beneath the surface of Luther's interpretation of Scripture. As such, it allows Luther the freedom to let the Bible take action in the world of the reader (or hearer) in ways that uninspired human texts cannot, for mere history alone presents an uncrossable chasm between the acts of God and the reader of the text. Timothy Maschke (2001: 173) draws attention to the unique manner in which Luther sensed the unity of the history-shaped words of Scripture and the believer in his or her own age: 'Because the events of Scripture were past, they were not recoverable. Yet, the text of Scripture provided the vital link for the hearer and preacher

which could lead one to faith in Christ. A sense of contemporaneity arises from the relationship of Christ with the Word and the Spirit...Christ's Spirit caused the Scriptures to be written. He continues to speak through the Spirit-ed Word.' Because Christ stands outside of time as the Son of God in power, the ever-divine Word, his presence can meet the reader of Scripture through the text and speak the word of promise afresh for every individual in the occurrence of what Luther scholar Gerhard Ebeling called 'pure word in the fullness of its power,' and a 'word-event' (Maschke 2001: 180-181; Ebeling 1964: 46).

The profound nature of this 'word-event' caused Luther to approach Scripture with an unparalleled contemporaneity (Maschke's term) that caused the Word of promise occasioned on the page of the Bible to break into current events. Once again, Luther's treatment of the sacrament is helpful here. In speaking of the words of institution, 'This is my body', Luther writes vehemently against those who seek to limit Christ's presence either to the spiritual or to the corporeal; as the Word, he transcends these categories.

See, the bright rays of the sun are so near you that they pierce into your eyes or your skin so that you feel it, yet you are unable to grasp them and put them into a box, even if you should try forever... [So it is with Christ]. Because it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present for you. He is there for you when he adds his Word and *binds himself*, saying, 'Here you are to find me'. Now when you have the Word, you can grasp and have him with certainty and say, 'Here I have thee, according to thy Word' (Luther 1965d: 68, emphasis added).

Because of this self-imposed obligation of Christ for the believer, the words of institution on the page of Scripture are not, for Luther, finally a recorded history of what Jesus said in the upper room, but a promise to which Jesus binds himself on behalf of all who come to the table. 'This is my body' becomes through the Word the declaration which creates the reality: the bread ('this') becomes what Christ promises it is ('my body') through faith, not through metaphysics and not as metaphor. This is not to say that faith is the condition that makes the statement 'This is my body' true; only that it makes it true *pro me*. Without faith as the open ear in the discourse between God and the individual, the Word is not received as a promise for me (Cary 2007: 3-4; Cary 2005: 447-486).

Cary (2007: 3-4) expounds on Luther's conception of faith in relation to the sacrament of baptism, noting '[The promise] lays down no conditions about what I must do or decide or even believe in order to make sure the promise applies to me. The promise applies to me because it says so: Christ says 'you' and he means *me*. So the promise of the gospel, on Luther's reckoning, is inherently and unconditionally for me. Faith does not make it so

but merely recognizes that it is so, a recognition that happens because we dare not call Christ a liar when he tells us, on that one momentous occasion, "I baptize you...".'

Where does this leave the Christian? The intersection between God's speech acts—the promises *for me*—and the text of Scripture create the all-important moment for the reception of the gospel of Christ. God condescends to the human being in his communication, being pleased to have his promise, which creates faith, come in humility. It comes most profoundly in the incarnation of the *Logos* in Jesus Christ, who is witnessed through the mediatory means of Scripture and the preached word. Thus, the words of the Bible became essential not only because of their inspiration by the Spirit in their writing but because God had ordained that the promise be communicated through the text. Because of this, Luther found it vital to uphold the form and clarity of the Bible, for when the promise is obscure or vague or ineffable, the gift is intangible and therefore inaccessible.

Searle comments on the intentionality expressed in illocutionary performances. He notes, 'In the performance of an illocutionary act in the literal utterance of a sentence, the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect; and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the rules for using the expressions he utters associate the expression with the production of that effect' (Searle 1969: 45).

To this end, one can see correspondence between Searle's observation about the use of illocutionary acts and Luther's understanding of the promise. The promise is satisfied by the faith of the hearer. Luther writes in his commentary on Romans 3: 4, 'According to my understanding, 'faith' (*fides*) here does not refer to the faithfulness of God but means trust in God, which is the actual fulfillment of the promise, as it is clearly seen in many passages' (Luther 1965e: 209). In other words, in promising Christ to the hearer, God intends to produce the effect of faith as a response. Faith that receives the gift of that promise is, in turn, produced by the hearer's recognition of the intent of God to produce that faith.

### **Concluding Remarks: Theological Implications of the Luther-Shaped Approach to the Word**

Many twenty-first century interpreters will undoubtedly read Luther's hermeneutical method and understanding of the Word with some discomfort. His convictions about God's Word grate on both our modern sensibilities and our historiographical commitments; distance between the reader and the text puts us at ease whenever we encounter interpretive moments of tension. But there is reason to think that a sympathetic reading of Luther's

movement toward *promissio* will help interpreting faith communities recover some of what was lost in the post-enlightenment campaign to distill a singular modern biblical hermeneutic.

The first thing we must say is that the study of speech acts in the mind of Luther exists as part of a larger, ongoing theological conversation. As noted above, many scholars have seen the connections between the work of Austin, Searle, and others (who were concerned primarily with orality), and the interpretation of Scripture. Kevin Vanhoozer's work, *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005: 44), outlines an argument for his perception that the word of God is not merely a divine voice, it is an actor; it does things, creates new states of being ('the Word became flesh'). He regards the relatively recent emphasis on the theological implications of speech-act philosophy as warranted, for it recapitulates a sentiment captured in the authors of the New Testament: that humans actually do things *in* speaking.

Such an approach does not button up the interpretive matter, as it were. Issues remain which must be addressed, and it is to those critiques that we now turn. There are at least three points of issue with an approach laid down by Luther and viewed through the lens of speech-act philosophy: (1) What does predication of such speech-acts to God do to divine immutability? (2) What are we to do with the blurred lines of authority between God and the Church that are displayed in the enactment of sacramental speech-acts? (3) Does Luther's reading of Scripture fall prey to the all-too-common error of flattening the peaks and raising the valleys of textual particularity for the sake of immediate relevance? That is to say, by adopting the primacy of promise, do we forsake the important roles that genre, theme, historical context, etc., play in the work of proper interpretation? The questions posed demand more insight than can be offered here; nevertheless, a few trajectories may be mapped out as a sort of *prolegomena*.

(1) Speech acts impose obligations on the speaker. Searle posits that promising in particular places obligations on the speaker to see that the promise is fulfilled (Searle 1969: 60). This would appear to place speech-act philosophy at odds with the immutability of God; the understanding of promises put forth by Searle and others seems to place conditions and obligations as prior to God's divine prerogative. Nothing, it is objected, may impose upon God, as if he were obliged to fulfill certain demands in order to act. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Divine Discourse*, responds that God can indeed acquire the obligations of a speaker, provided those obligations are inherent to his divine nature, that they reflect what it means for God to be Godself.

The fact that certain actions are character-required of God, with respect to God's loving character, is not the consequence of something's being imposed on God from outside; it is simply an aspect of the internal structure of that character-

formation which is *being a loving person*. To say that a certain action is character-required of the loving God is not to say that God is required to be loving in character; it is rather to say that the action is required for God's conducting Godself in loving character (Wolterstorff 1995: 111-112).

Thus, God speaking to and with human beings—assuming that God acts as Godself at all times—may bring about certain requirements incumbent upon God *as* the loving, relational God. These requirements are not given to God by humanity, but rather they exist as an expression of God ever and always acting the way God acts.

(2) Luther does indeed hold out a special place for ordained pastoral offices in the congregation. He understands the authority given to the Church to be instituted for the church regularly by ministers, not because they have better standing before the Lord, but rather a matter of calling through the congregation. Pastoral ministry is a public service. Luther affirms, 'So it is called God's Word, God's sacrament, God's ministry, and it is rightly said: 'God is speaking, God is baptizing' when he does it through ministers, since indeed all things are attributed to God which holy men have spoken' (Klug 1983: 297). However, Luther also insists that the so-called priesthood of the believer invests authority in every Christian and imparts the divine gift of God's forgiveness given in confession, which depends not on clerical authority, but on the Word of the promise. Make no mistake, Luther is audacious in this claim. How can he assert that the common man or woman may speak a word of absolution from God in a manner that is in any way authoritative?

Wolterstorff is again helpful here. He addresses the question of vested authority at length, concluding that under the right conditions a person could be understood as bearing authority on another's behalf, thereby producing the same effect that an unmediated communication would produce. He refers to this phenomenon as one of *deputation*. Deputation is limited in scope and reflects a specific appointment. It relates authority to speak on behalf of another. According to Wolterstorff, deputized speech has a similar issuance as granting someone power of attorney: in certain cases, and limited to certain statements, a deputized speaker speaks on behalf of the deputizer; or, to say it another way, the deputizer speaks through the deputy (Wolterstorff 1995: 43-51).

Michael Horton takes this deputation a step further, linking it specifically to covenant relationships. Thus, the 'power of attorney' imagery of Wolterstorff applies even more directly, for God is, in promising and commanding, speaking in a covenantal framework. 'To the extent that we understand the scriptures as a covenantal document—a treaty of sorts—we recognize that it is a divinely ordained legal convention that regulates this speech act. In other words, *X* (the utterances of a prophet or apostle) counts as *Y* (the ut-

terances of God) in context *C* (the biblical covenant/canon)' (Horton 2002: 129). While Luther would likely not join Horton in categorizing the promise in juridical language, the authority of deputation (and, to the degree that it infers a promise to a people, the concept of covenant) is essentially what Luther means to offer to every Christian through his interpretation of the ministry of the keys: Christ's deputation of all who bear his name to speak the word of forgiveness through the authority he invests in his Church.

(3) As an interpretive rule, it is essential that faith communities recognize that not every individual pericope of the Bible serves as promise. Luther recognized this himself, drawing out the bifurcated essence of Scripture: that of law, which kills, and gospel, which makes alive. Both are holy and necessary to grasp the significance of Christ. However, the arc of the Bible which testifies to the redemptive declaration 'God with us' *has always* been seen as a promise for the Church to take hold of. Luther's interpretive method remains urgent in current church contexts, for his is one that invites the Christian into the very arms of Christ.

Maschke (2001: 182) sums up the case nicely: 'Luther bridges [the] ditch of history with the living, life-giving Spirit-filled Word which both brings God's power and presence into the present as well as draws the reader into the experience of the text. Luther understood the biblical text as the vehicle for bringing Christ into the contemporary experience of the reader.' The inherent eschatological focus of Scripture bids hearers read the text as intimate address, not as a collection of facts or ancient historical surveys to be analyzed at a distance. Scripture bears out the promises of God which are being fulfilled daily and *will* be fulfilled ultimately.

With this in mind, faith communities should give ear to the Scripture as a vehicle for God's declarative promise. This makes the reader cognizant of the direct contact with God that is intended by the authors and the interpreters of Scripture throughout the Church's history. It reorients one's perspective toward the Bible from one of subject/object (learner/curriculum) to one of Speaker/listener (Giver/receiver). It is when the reader of the Bible comes face-to-face with the text as Christ's promise *for him or her* that he or she recognizes the intention of the Word in giving the text—namely, to create new life through the faith produced by the promise. '[T]hese are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20: 31).

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