

CAMBRIDGE



P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Promises, promises

by *Caroline Eade*

*A sentence uttered makes a world appear
Where all things happen as it says they do
We doubt the speaker, not the words we hear
Words have no words for words that are not true¹*

*God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change
his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?²*

Summary

We all make promises, whether informally, to our friends and family, or formally, in contracts, deeds and vows. Promises are made by companies, governments and international leaders. It seems obvious that a promise carries moral weight. Nevertheless, all of us make rash agreements, or over-commit ourselves, or entirely forget what we have said, and therefore fail to carry out our promises. At the corporate level, it is sometimes easy for a promise to be overridden by financial or political concerns. This paper explores promise-making from a biblical perspective, and suggests some pointers for how we might promise well.

Introduction

Try this: over the next few weeks, make a mental note every time you make a promise, whether it's 'I'll have it done by Monday', 'I'll be praying about that', or 'I'll be here for you'. Check, if you can, whether or not you keep it.

In 2006, Churchill Insurance published the results of its research into promises in Britain.³ Without professing to be a scientific study, the research claims that 6.5 million women and 4.2 million men in Britain break a promise every 24 hours. The press release stated, 'Two million men and women admit to regularly breaking 'major' pledges including their marriage vows (6 per cent), promises to be faithful (12 per cent) and not to drink (3 per cent), smoke (19 per cent) or gamble (1 per cent).' If breaking promises is so widespread, what does it mean to make a promise in the first place? Is a promise anything more than a vague statement of intent?

Promises and language

At first sight it seems as if promises are a distinct part of language, separate from other forms of speech. Saying that we promise something appears to have a different effect on the hearer from saying that we think something, or saw something. The philosopher John Austin⁴ analyses this apparent distinction between a statement which describes something (constative) and a statement which achieves something (performative). To give an example, saying, 'He is running' appears to be entirely different from saying 'I will' in the context of a marriage ceremony, or 'I apologise' in the context of acknowledging a wrong. On the face of it, only this second kind of statement has any effect on the world outside the speaker. Similarly, stating 'I promise' does just that – it effects a promise. The words and the action are the same.

Austin goes on, however, to note that all statements are in fact performative.⁵ To say, 'He is running' is, in effect, to say 'I state that he is running'. To say 'I state' would be a clear performative statement – omitting those words does not indicate that we are reserving our position on whether or not the statement is true. By saying something we commit ourselves to its truthfulness, and invest it with our authority. We therefore act as moral agents every time we communicate.

But promises, which express intention about a future course of action, differ in at least one respect from language generally. A promise cannot be 'true' in the same way as other language can be true. A promise may be made honestly or deceitfully, but its 'truthfulness' is demonstrated in its performance. Promises, unlike other statements, require action by the speaker, and the action is as much part of the moral framework of promising as the initial making of the promise.

volume 16

number 4

december 2007

ISSN 1361-7710

Writing group

Denis Alexander PhD
John Coffey PhD
Caroline Eade MA
Julian Rivers PhD
Michael Schluter PhD
Christopher Townsend MA
Christopher Watkin PhD
James Williams MA MPhil
Kate Williams MA
Margaret Wilson BA DipTh

Published by

The Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319
Fax: 01223 566359
E-mail: info@jubilee-centre.org
www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers
Registered Charity No. 288783

1 W. H. Auden, 'Words', *Collected Poems*, ed. Mendelson, Faber and Faber, 1976, p.473.

2 Num. 23:19.

3 www.churchill.com/pressReleases/03082006.htm

4 John Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, OUP, 1975, p.6.

5 *Ibid.*, pp.134–6.

Language and God's image

This analysis of why language matters, morally, becomes clearer as we consider that we are made by God and in his image. It is intrinsic to God's character to speak. He brought the world into being by his Word, and relates to that world by speaking into it. God's words are true: truthful, effective and – crucially – reliable.⁶ 'At root, in the Hebrew Scriptures truth is a matter of fidelity. Indeed, the Hebrew word *emeth* was translated in the King James Version as 'truth' but is rendered 'faithful' in almost all modern translations.'⁷ God's nature is to commit himself to creation, humanity and his chosen people by making promises, and to be faithful in keeping them. The biblical narrative – indeed, the whole of history – is the story of God making and keeping his promises.

We too have the ability to create worlds with our words – not exactly as God does, but in reflection of him – and to commit ourselves to them. We use language to mould reality around us. We are stewards of language even as God is its author. God makes promises in order to invite us into relationship with himself. Our response is either one of faith and obedience, or of unbelief and disobedience. It is in the nature of a promise that the person to whom it is made can choose whether or not to trust the person making it, because the promise is not immediately fulfilled. By giving Abraham the promise of a son, God gave him the opportunity to learn to trust that God would keep it.⁸ Similarly, our promises are an intrinsic part of our establishing relationships of trust with others. Promises made insincerely, or not kept, evidence a *relational* dysfunction.

God's promises – covenants and their effect

In many cases God does not make an isolated promise that is fulfilled once and then is exhausted. His promises constitute a covenantal relationship between himself and those to whom he speaks. He inaugurates a binding and lasting commitment between himself and the other party, such that the ongoing relationship will be defined by the terms of the covenant. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that God enters into a covenantal relationship with people, and his promises are often found within that relational context.

There are hints throughout the Bible that this covenantal relationship should be the model for the faithfulness of God's people to each other and, to an extent, even to those outside the covenant. The treaty the Israelites made with the Gibeonites, their enemies, was not nullified by the Gibeonites' deception regarding the threat they posed.⁹ The treaty had been made on oath to the Lord, the God of Israel – a deliberate reference to the covenant-making God – and its binding character is demonstrated in later Israelite history.¹⁰ In Malachi the rebuke to Israel is that they have broken the covenant with God by breaking faith with each other. Similarly, Paul's appeal to the Ephesians to put off falsehood and speak truthfully to each other is made on the basis that they are all members of one body and of God's household.¹¹ By implication, a covenant has a ripple effect; those who have benefited from God's faithfulness to his people should demonstrate that faithfulness to others. Those who are members of God's covenant community testify to his nature as a promise-keeping God as they fulfil their own promises.

God's grace for broken promises

Not all God's covenants are the same, however. Those with, for example, Abraham and David were what we might call promissory, and with Israel under Moses, obligatory. In the Abrahamic

covenant God bound himself to fulfil an unconditional and unilateral promise. In the Mosaic covenant, Israel received a promise, but also gave one – that they would keep its obligations.¹²

Although God describes the relationship between himself and Israel as a covenant,¹³ the nature of the agreement is more akin to what we might now describe in contractual terms.¹⁴ The argument of Galatians 3 highlights that the Mosaic law was bilateral rather than unilateral. The people of Israel were told its conditions and voluntarily submitted to them.¹⁵ They were promised rewards in exchange for their performance of its obligations, and penalties for breaching them. The promises Israel made could not be kept, however. As Paul says, 'If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.'¹⁶ The law demonstrates that the most important promise of all, to obey the God who made us, is the very one we cannot keep.

Israel's persistent failure to keep its promises entitled God to withdraw his blessing, as the exile showed. Yet the promises to Abraham and David, and ultimately those made in Christ, demonstrate that God chooses to continue in relationship with those who trust him, despite their inability to keep their promises. God makes a covenant with us that is rooted not in our ability to perform its obligations, but in his faithfulness.

We therefore approach the subject of promises knowing that we are all promise-breakers who can only be forgiven for our faithlessness by God's grace. His is a character of love and faithfulness,¹⁷ grace and truth.¹⁸ We cannot sincerely advocate better promise-keeping if we do not recognise our need for mercy for all our broken promises, and extend that mercy to others for theirs.

Making promises well

Our words

It follows from all this that our promises should be made truthfully, which will mean being careful with our words. For example, a church in Cambridge recently amended the promise made by the congregation at a baby's dedication, as the previous version potentially committed everyone to praying for each child individually – an unrealistic expectation. Similarly, making a promise to *try* to do something, (and then ensuring that we do try) avoids misleading another person about our ability to get it done. There is a danger, of course, that we might make such promises in order to avoid making a commitment at all and so fail to encourage others to trust us. But better to make a limited commitment, and carry it out, than fail to keep a bolder one.

The nature of a truthful promise will be determined to some extent by cultural differences. In some societies a promise to come round at 3 p.m. may in fact mean a promise to come round at any time between 3 p.m. and 10 p.m., as long as no other visitors turn up. There are social conventions about how a promise comes to be binding. But considering God's perspective on promises allows us to assess our own customs, as well as others', in a critical light. In English culture it is commonplace to say something like, 'We must meet for coffee – I will give you a ring,' without necessarily meaning that we will make the meeting happen. There is a thin line between making an imprecise promise and making what appears to be a promise without intending to commit at all. The latter does not properly honour God or strengthen our relationships.

Our circumstances

Deuteronomy 23:21 commands the Israelites to keep whatever

6 e.g. Isa. 45:22–23; Isa. 55.

7 Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, *Colossians Re:mixed*, Paternoster Press, 2005, p.45. See also Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Inter-Varsity Press, 1983, pp.288–9.

8 Gen. 12:2; 15:4–5.

9 Josh. 9.

10 2 Sam. 21.

11 Eph. 4:25.

12 Exod. 24:3. See also Ezra 10:3, where the people say, 'Let us make a covenant before our God', promising to obey the law.

13 Exod. 24:8; 34:27.

14 This is not to suggest that the promise made to Israel in the law was not gracious – God's entering into relationship with people is always gracious, because it is never deserved.

15 Exod. 24:3. See also Ezra 10:3.

16 Gal. 3:21.

17 e.g. Exod. 34:6.

18 John 1:17.

vows they have made to the Lord, because they were made freely. The restrictions in Numbers 30 on when a woman's oath is binding may now seem arcane. But the principle at stake is that a vow made by a woman who is part of her father's or husband's household (and therefore under their authority) is subject to ratification by the father or husband, presumably because she may otherwise be prevented by them from fulfilling it. To make an oath binding on someone who is incapable of fulfilling it would be harsh, and the principle is therefore one of leniency. Conversely, vows made by a widow or divorced woman are binding on her, because she is presumed to have the freedom to fulfil them.¹⁹ The principle here is that we should only make promises that, as far as we are aware, we have the ability to keep. There is a warning here to those of us who are tempted to over-commit ourselves.

There may be times when it is difficult to avoid making a promise, as when an employment contract includes a requirement to promise not to work for a competitor after the period of employment ceases. While such a clause may or may not be legally enforceable, to a Christian it should not be completely meaningless, once made. Perhaps the best course would be to attempt to negotiate the clause at the outset – or if that is not possible, at least to consider the cost of abiding by it, and be prepared to pay that price as part of taking the job.

Equally, James 4 anticipates that we may make promises out of arrogance or pride. It is all too easy to make ambitious plans for the future, and to forget that we might not be able, or it might not be wise, to carry them out. If we are being truthful in our language and faithful to others (insofar as our bold statements amount to a promise), we should openly acknowledge that those plans are subject to God's enabling and will.

Promises in their relational context

Each promise made represents an opportunity for a relationship to be established or grow, or to be undermined and destroyed. The nature of the relationship will vary according to the nature of the promise that is made and vice versa, as the following discussion illustrates.

Marriage

A marriage is probably the type of relationship closest to that between the covenanting God and his people.²⁰ The nature of what each party promises, and their expectations of what fulfilment of the promise looks like, are set out in summary form in the marriage vows, but are worked out in practice over time and as circumstances change. The promise is essentially to be committed to the relationship, and it is both an aspiration and an obligation – each person knows that they will not always love or honour the other perfectly in the details of their lives, but they commit themselves to renewing the attempt continually.

Commercial contracts

Two companies dealing with each other at arm's length will negotiate the terms (i.e. the promises each is going to make) and then expect the other to stick to them, or to agree any changes. The contract will be limited in time and scope. The two companies are not necessarily intending to enter into any ongoing commitment beyond the term of the contract. The trust that underpins promises made in an interpersonal context is, to an extent, replaced by the element of legal enforceability in a commercial contract. In some commercial contracts there may be only the faintest notion of a 'relationship' of any kind. In the case of *Carlill v. Carbolic Smoke Ball Co.* (1893; in which a company gave a guarantee of £100 to anyone who contracted influenza after using their product) arguably there was no effective relationship between the producer

and the user of the product at all.²¹ Or perhaps the very words of the promised guarantee, and Mrs Carlill's response (of buying the product in reliance on the guarantee), created some form of relationship,²² even if extremely limited.

For some commercial contracts, where the parties are intending to work closely together in the long term, it may be productive to include in the contract an expectation that they will proactively seek ways of developing their working relationship beyond the strict scope of the contract. Indeed, parties to a commercial contract may choose to overlook failures in performance for the sake of preserving the relationship – although in practice there will be difficult decisions to be made regarding existing obligations to suppliers or customers, employees and shareholders; acting graciously towards one person may involve irresponsibility towards another.

Politics

A similar 'contractual' principle is often at work in the promises made by governments, such as to their electorates in a manifesto, or between states in international treaties. The criticism of Gordon Brown for failing to hold a referendum on the Lisbon treaty²³ has at its root an accusation that the UK government is attempting to wriggle out of a manifesto commitment. That there is even a debate about such matters of political trust perhaps indicates that our public life is still influenced by biblical principles. The same may be true if a government received public support for keeping an international treaty which no longer served the national interest but benefited others.

Nevertheless, a whole constitutional framework may be based on more binding promises, in the form of a covenantal commitment between equal partners. Hence the opening words of the American constitution are: 'We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.' A similar model is found in the treaties establishing the European Community.

Christian discipleship

The professions of commitment that we might make to the Lord are, like a marriage, more in the vein of a covenant than a commercial contract. Which of us is not challenged when singing words such as, 'I will feed the poor and hungry, I will stand up for the truth. I will take my cross and follow to the corners of the earth'²⁴ While such promises are certainly not to be made lightly, and we must be aware of the potential for hypocrisy, we say them as an expression of commitment to continue in relationship with him who has loved us unfaithfully, and to do his will. We can say them honestly, acknowledging that we will not always keep them, but with the desire to see them become increasingly true of us. Peter failed, in the short term, to keep his promise that he would lay down his life for Christ, and wept bitterly for it.²⁵ But if Christian tradition is to be believed, he went on to keep that promise in his martyrdom. What ultimately matters in our relationship with God, however, is not what we say we will do, but whether we are prepared to do what he asks of us.²⁶

General principles

This analysis indicates that we need to understand promises in their relational context. A promise is not less binding in one type of relationship than another, but the interplay between the type of

21 Stephen Copp, 'Developing a Relationally Based Law of Contract: A Question of Good Faith?', LCF Academic Conference on Law and Relationism, Aberdeen University, 1998.

22 See also the discussion of 'contingent relationships' in Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, pp.7–9.

23 See e.g. 'Give Europe a say', *The Economist*, 27 October 2007; 'This broken promise is part of a wider fear of democracy', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2007.

24 Stuart Townend, 'With a prayer you fed the hungry', © 2002, Thankyou Music.

25 Mark 14:72.

26 Matt. 21:28–32.

19 Num. 30:9.

20 e.g. Hosea *passim*; Eph. 5; Rev. 19:7–9; 21:2.

promise and the nature of the relationship delineates the commitment behind the promise. Treating a marriage vow as if it were a commercial contract, for example, devalues both the relationship and the promise. But as promises also change the nature of a relationship, choosing to relate well means choosing to make promises deliberately, and to fulfil those promises sacrificially insofar as we are able. It may also mean making promises that are essentially commitments to a relationship, rather than to a specific action – in our business and working life, as well as with family, friends and within the church. Many of the above examples demonstrate not only how a relationship can be forged by a promise, but also how the very identity of the parties is transformed in the process.

Moreover, the principle that a promise can change the nature of a relationship holds true not just for making promises, but more especially for keeping them. Someone who consistently breaks their promises will, eventually, lose the trust of those around them. Rebuking someone for persistent unfaithfulness to their commitments may be part of a loving church discipline aimed at their repentance and transformation, or part of a social order which prevents promise-breakers from continually taking advantage of others. A Christian whose workman lets them down without good reason may choose to be gracious and overlook the fault, but if the workman is likely to do the same again to someone else it may be right to call that person to account – in the church, if they are a believer, or in court if they are not.²⁷ For every Christian, the way in which we make and keep our promises should be part of developing a faithful and consistent character. Just as our thoughtlessness or fickleness may lead us at times to make unwise promises, or break those we have made, so too the transformation of our character by God's Spirit should lead to the opposite traits²⁸ and better promise-keeping.

Breaking promises?

There may be some situations in which a promise can legitimately be broken, because the nature of the 'relationship' underlying it does not justify keeping it. Adam Smith gives the example of a promise made under duress because of the threats of a highwayman.²⁹ The element of threat means that each person is unable to trust the other from the outset. Here a breach of promise may arise from a breakdown of trust rather than being the cause of it.

Nevertheless, Smith holds that although such a promise is not binding on the person who made it, it is still dishonouring not to keep it. When people invoke the language of a promise, they do so because they are appealing to some value of right conduct.³⁰ From a Christian point of view, this 'right conduct' is the conviction that our language should be truthful, relationally as well as proposi-

tionally. Does that mean it is always right to keep a promise, no matter what? Herod's promise to Herodias's daughter to give her whatever she asked for³¹ was not only made rashly, but kept against his conscience and for bad motives. It would have been better to renege on the promise than have John the Baptist executed. Even in less extreme situations, there may be a more important principle at stake than that of ensuring that we always keep a promise. With honesty and humility, trust may be preserved in a relationship even where a promise is not kept.³²

We should not, however, underestimate the powerful example of someone who chooses to keep a promise even though it has become difficult or costly to perform. As we have seen, the Gibeonites' deceitfulness did not entitle the Israelites to break their promise. Similarly, Jacob's marriage to Leah was not nullified despite the misapprehension Jacob was under regarding her identity, and the deceitfulness of her father to which she must have been party. While the Bible does not expressly hold these situations out as examples for us to follow, the circumstances in which we excuse ourselves from keeping a promise must be exceptional.

Where do we go from here?

The ability to make and keep promises is one of the ways in which we display the image of a relational, faithful God. To reflect him well, we should be truthful (and therefore careful) in making promises, and trustworthy in keeping them. But that image is marred. However careful we are about making promises, we are fallible and finite, and cannot always carry out what we have promised. So Christians must model faithfulness – costly commitment and transparent trustworthiness, and a countercultural willingness to give and to keep our word. But we must also extend mercy – because we know ourselves to be flawed, and because others will also let us down. Our fallenness requires us to acknowledge that we need grace if we are to continue in relationship with each other, despite our broken promises.

31 Mark 6:22–23.

32 2 Cor. 1 provides an example of Paul breaking a promise out of love for the Corinthians – but he is at pains to point out that God's faithfulness in Christ is not thereby impugned.

Caroline Eade studied theology in Cambridge, and now lives and works there. She had a brief escape to London and Guildford, initially to work with the Evangelical Alliance in assisting social action projects to operate more effectively, and then to train as a lawyer. She is now mainly occupied in advising charities and other not-for-profit organisations on their legal obligations.

Receiving Cambridge Papers

If you would like to receive *Cambridge Papers*, and you are not already on our mailing list, please join via our website www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers or send an e-mail to info@jubilee-centre.org

Alternatively, please send your name and address to:
The Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319, Fax: 01223 566359

There is no subscription charge but if you are able to do so, you are invited to make a donation from time to time, by standing order, cheque or credit card, to help meet the cost of publishing and distributing *Cambridge Papers*. If you are a UK taxpayer, signing a Gift Aid declaration (available from the Jubilee Centre) will increase the value of your donations.

All available papers dating back to 1992 can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

To encourage debate, we have created a Responses section on our website. There is an open invitation to write a response of up to 500 words to a recent *Cambridge Paper*. Selected contributions will be published on the site at www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/responses.php

Cambridge Papers is a non-profit making quarterly publication which aims to contribute to debate on contemporary issues from a Christian perspective. The writing group is an informal association of Christians sharing common convictions and concerns. The contribution of each is as an individual only and not representative of any church or organisation.

Next issue: The public face of evangelicals