

PROMISE KEEPERS AND THE FORGOTTEN PROMISE

As Christians the promises of God are foundational to our very lives. It was faith in God's promise that brought us to salvation. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). It is faith in various divine promises that gives us strength for daily living. A promise is "one's pledge to another to do or not to do something specified" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary). God's promises, of course, are irrevocable and absolutely binding. This is not so with human promises. We may make promises with full intention of keeping them but, for various reasons, find ourselves unable to do so. Christians, however, should be very cautious in making promises hastily or lightly. Since God has set the standard of veracity in keeping His promises, we, His children, should seek to keep ours.

ORIGIN OF PROMISE KEEPERS

Promise Keepers is a Christian organization for men. It was born in the heart of Bill McCartney, who at that time was the head football coach for the University of Colorado. In 1990 McCartney, who built Colorado into a national football power, began to discuss with friends his vision for some kind of an organization that would produce Christian men who were stronger and more spiritual.

With this goal in mind, a convention was organized, which met in Boulder, Colorado, in 1991 with over 4,000 men in attendance. The next year it drew 22,000 and the next year 50,000. Needless to say, events of this magnitude have drawn considerable attention not only from the religious press but also from the secular media. Rallies have now been expanded beyond the Colorado area to other parts of the country. A national office has been established, and local chapters are being organized.

PURPOSE OF PROMISE KEEPERS

Promise Keepers is limited to men. It exists for the express purpose of creating more vital male leadership in the church. It is broadly evangelical with a declared purpose to instruct men in biblical teaching to the end they may be better fathers, husbands, and church leaders. It is interdenominational in its thrust.

Its "Mission Statement" contains the following declaration:

Promise keepers is a Christ-centered ministry, dedicated to uniting men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world We believe God wants us to use Promise Keepers as a spark in His hand to ignite a nation-wide movement calling upon men from all denominational, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to reconciliation, discipleship, and godliness.

When one reads this statement, one is impressed at first glance. Here is a movement that wants to produce godly Christian men. What could be wrong with that goal? Nothing in itself. The problem arises when the theological and methodological premises of the movement are examined.

Several phrases in this statement of purpose are worthy of careful examination. It is “dedicated to uniting men.” At what theological price? What will be the basis of the “uniting”? What kind of “vital relationships” will be promoted?

The intent is to bring together “men from all denominational backgrounds.” Will this include Roman Catholics? Will it include men who are members of churches within the National and World Council of Churches?

Men will be guided toward “reconciliation.” What kind of reconciliation? Will they be able to fellowship and work together despite important differences over biblical doctrine? Red lights begin to flash as one contemplates the implications of the statement quoted.

STRENGTHS OF PROMISE KEEPERS

We are certainly in need of more spiritual men in this day of declension. Many churches lack spiritual men. Many find it difficult to locate men in their membership who meet the spiritual qualifications of deacons or who can fill other leadership roles. The goal of seeking to increase the number of spiritual men in Christ’s church cannot in itself be faulted.

Furthermore, it cannot be denied there is a need for men to take a more aggressive role in prayer, in the worship of God, and in personal witness. Many Christian men are woefully lacking in biblical knowledge and do not evidence much desire for spiritual things. Promise Keepers aims to correct these deficiencies.

One of the most pressing needs in the church today is for men to assume their rightful place of spiritual leadership in their homes. As husbands they are supposed to lead their wives in the ways of God. As fathers they are to raise their children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Sadly, however, many Christian men have little or no real spiritual leadership in their family. Many men are consumed with their secular employment or with other pursuits and give little time to their families. Promise Keepers is dedicated to challenging men to do a better job at home.

There are seven promises which are accepted by a participant in the Promise Keepers program. They cover various parts of one’s life such as personal devotions, family life, and church participation. The idea of making solemn covenants with God certainly has biblical precedent and is not to be despised. Modern Christians shy away from “getting tied down,” and the concept of promises to God has merit. Despite all of these commendable goals, there are problems with Promise Keepers which need more scrutinization.

THE WEAKNESSES OF PROMISE KEEPERS

In the rush to express Christian love, many have forgotten the necessity of biblical discernment. While there are good elements in many Christian organizations, the good must always be weighed against the bad. Our love is to abound “in knowledge and in all judgment [discernment]” (Phil. 1:9). In other words, we must be theologically discriminating in our evaluation of men and movements. While we have mentioned some positive aspects of Promise Keepers, we must also call attention to some dangerous and unbiblical features as well.

An Inadequate Doctrinal Statement. The “Statement of Faith” contains five points. They deal briefly with: the existence of God, the nature of the Bible, the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and the facts of sin and salvation. The “Statement” is crafted in such a way that a broad spectrum of professing Christians could agree to it. This is the reason so many men from a wide variety of theological and ecclesiastical backgrounds can be involved together in the movement.

A Failure to Differentiate Between Biblical and Non-Biblical Churches. One of the seven promises of a Promise Keeper is: “A Promise Keeper is committed to support the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor and by actively giving his time and resources.” This sounds appealing and noble. Many questions arise, however. What is a biblical church? Are all churches biblical churches? Is a Catholic church worthy of support? What about a church that includes in its “mission” the support of the National and World Council of Churches? Promise Keepers does not speak to these vexing problems with any evidence of biblical discernment.

To encourage men to support their pastor and their church even though neither is following the Word of God is to compromise the truth. Christian men need to be told plainly and scripturally they ought not to be members of nor support a church that is not true to God’s Word.

The Use of Speakers Representing a Wide Range of Theological Viewpoints. Men who attend the rallies sponsored by Promise Keepers are going to be exposed to a host of speakers who represent contradictory viewpoints. There will be men such as Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, a very ecumenical group. Bright was one of the signers of the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” an attempt to defend a closer tie with Roman Catholics. Jack Hayford has been featured; he is pastor of the Church of the Way in Van Nuys, California, and a leading spokesman for the modern charismatic movement. There is Charles Swindoll, president of Dallas Theological Seminary and a leader with very broad concepts of fellowship.

Among other speakers who have been featured are Bill Hybels, pastor of a “super-church” near Chicago; Luis Palau, an ecumenical evangelist; and Chuck Smith, another charismatic pastor from California. To expose the men of Bible-believing churches to such a hodgepodge of speakers is a great spiritual disservice. We are to “speak the things which become sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Many of these men (and others like them whom we have not mentioned) do not teach sound doctrine.

An Unscriptural Ecumenical Emphasis. Promise Keepers is evolving into a major threat to sound, biblical, separated local churches who are seeking to maintain a holy stand for God. The appeal of Promise Keepers is strong. Its promotion by noted evangelical leaders is enticing. Even in fundamental local churches, men know other men who have become involved, are enthusiastic supporters of the program, and encourage their friends to be part of it. Pastors who do not wish to “get on the bandwagon” can face considerable opposition. The pressures are similar to those faced by pastors years ago when Billy Graham first began to move toward a more ecumenical position. Woe to the pastor who said anything against Billy Graham! He could well lose his pulpit (and not a few did).

The “Reconciliation Statement” of Promise Keepers emphasizes that one of their goals is “getting together” by replacing “personal prejudice” with “biblical unity.” Question: What constitutes “personal prejudice” in the realm of spiritual truth and fellowship? Is the fact that some Christian men and their churches remain separated from other men and their churches merely a matter of “personal prejudice,” or is it a matter of biblical obedience?

Promise Keepers is definitely ecumenical. Promise #6 states: “A Promise Keeper is committed to reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.” The phrase “denominational barriers” is a tricky one. To many, denominations are simply man-made organizations that have long ago lost their relevance and should be dismantled. Many liberal ecumenicists would hold such a view. However, what some evangelicals view as “denominational barriers” are really theological barriers. For instance, when J. Gresham Machen left the Presbyterian Church years ago, he founded another small denomination. But did he do so just out of spite, and are the differences separating the two groups inconsequential? No. There were deep theological issues at stake at that time and those issues are still present. Groups like Promise Keepers tend to confuse “denominational barriers” with biblical and theological barriers. Biblical barriers were created by God not men.

This principle was seen when a group of churches departed from the old Northern Baptist Convention and formed the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. “Denominational barriers” were “theological barriers.” There are some lines that cannot and ought not be erased. But Promise Keepers is moving apace to erase many of these barriers. If a member of a fundamental, separatist church can unite in worship with men who are content to belong to churches that are part of the National Council of Churches, an apostate body, then the position of biblical separation really has little practical meaning. We are saying, in effect, the position these men have taken, while it may not be personally ours, is allowed within the bounds of true Christian fellowship and the associations a man’s church may have should not be an impediment to cooperation and service. If this attitude catches hold in fundamental, separatist churches, their historic position will be quickly undermined.

A Large Charismatic Presence. The modern charismatic movement is active and pervasive. Charismatics believe the “sign gifts,” which most of the church until recent times have accepted as obsolete, are now active and essential in the life of the church. This includes the “gift of tongues,” which is perhaps the most prominent of the gifts emphasized. Charismatics have a

large influence with Promise Keepers.

Bill McCartney, the generally-recognized founder of Promise Keepers of whom we spoke earlier, is himself a member of a Vineyard church. The Vineyard movement sprang from the ministry of a pastor in California named John Wimber. Vineyard churches emphasize the validity of “signs and wonders” today and view miraculous displays of divine power as essential to the growth of the church.

McCartney's pastor, James Ryle, a charismatic “signs and wonders” advocate, is a board member of Promise Keepers and has claimed God has given him special revelation for the Body of Christ.

Ryle is not alone. As mentioned previously, many featured speakers are charismatics. Randy Phillips, the current president of Promise Keepers, is also affiliated with the Vineyard movement and spoke at Robert Schuller's International Men's Conference in 1994. Promise Keepers is well-permeated with charismatic influence.

Historically, fundamental, separatist churches have declined to become involved with charismatics. However, cooperation with Promise Keepers will change this.

Unholy Music. “The men erupt in laughter as preacher Charles Swindoll, clad in faded denim, rides into the arena atop a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, the savage vocals and scratchy chords of ‘Born To Be Wild’ blaring in the background” (*Christianity Today*, 2/6/95). In a meeting intended to produce men who are attempting to learn how to control the natural “wildness” of their sinful natures, one would hardly expect help from the secular rock song “Born To Be Wild.”

One national magazine described the scene at one of the Boulder conferences thus: “A Christian rock band set the mood. When the music stopped the crowd rose to do ‘the wave,’ shouting ‘Jesus, Jesus, Jesus’ . . . ‘We’re scoring baskets for Jesus,’ declared emcee Bob Horner, an official with Campus Crusade for Christ” (*Newsweek*, 7/29/94, “The Gospel of Guyhood”).

Pastors who are trying to hold the line on music, guarding their flocks from the incursions of the modern rock beat, will not be helped by Promise Keepers. Biblically there is no such thing as “Christian rock.” The rock beat has its roots in the world and the lusts of the world and cannot be sanctified for use in the temple of the Lord.

MAJOR FAILURE OF PROMISE KEEPERS

The apostle Paul gave us a great principle of holiness and a guideline for our conduct both personally and corporately: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers . . . Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:14, 17-18).

This is a divine promise based upon a divine command. It is a promise the leaders of Promise Keepers have forgotten. Exactly what does it say?

1. True believers are not to be yoked (associated in religious worship and service) with unbelievers. In uniting, particularly with Roman Catholics, in worship, Promise Keepers is violating this command. Many Roman Catholics are unbelievers in the New Testament sense. They do not understand the true Gospel nor are they resting by faith alone in the finished work of Christ. Within our fundamental churches are many people who were formerly Roman Catholics and would testify to this fact.
2. We are to remain separated in religious activity from what the passage calls “the unclean thing.” Verses 14-16 delineate the “unclean thing.” It is that which involves unrighteousness, spiritual darkness, satanic power, unbelief, and idolatry. The ancient city of Corinth, where the Corinthian church was located, was filled with false religion. Paul is warning Christians they are to remain separate from false religion. It is difficult for some present-day Christians to realize many practitioners of false religion have smiling faces, cordial handshakes, caring ways, and at least some biblical terminology.

Some contemporary Christians are apt to dismiss Paul’s warnings as related only or mostly to situations in the New Testament times with little application for us today. The great scholar Charles Hodge, however, had better perception than that. Hear his comments on the II Corinthians six passage.

We are to keep aloof from all intimate associations with the evil. The exhortation is general, and is not to be confined to partaking of heathen sacrifices And as we know that their special danger was hidden from idolaters . . . it is to be presumed that it was from all association with the heathen in their worship that the apostle intended to warn them. But this is only one application of the principle laid down, viz., that intimate associations ought not to be formed by the people of God with those who are not His people It is no doubt true that by unbelievers Paul meant the heathen. But it does not follow from this that intimate association with the heathen is all that is here forbidden. The principle applies to all the enemies of God and children of darkness (*An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 165-66).

The “yoke” speaks of combined or cooperative religious activity. In commenting on the phrase “Be ye not unequally yoked together,” Hodge says: “It is the union of incongruous, uncongenial elements or persons that is forbidden (Hodge, op. cit., p. 167).

God promises in this great passage to “receive” us and to exercise His fatherly care toward us if we obey His command to remain uncontaminated in our service and worship. Here is a great promise for all Promise Keepers to consider.

But should we refuse to fellowship with other believers on doctrinal grounds? Many feel our doctrinal basis of fellowship should be minimal indeed and that “loving Jesus” is more important than doctrinal accuracy and agreement. Randy Phillips, president of Promise Keepers, was

asked: "On the issue of Catholicism, does Promise Keepers have a policy on how to interact with Roman Catholics?" Phillips responded: "What we do care about is do you love Jesus and are you born again by the Spirit of God? And so if you have been born again by the Spirit of God, then whatever the labels are should not divide us. So from that standpoint all men are welcome . . . whether you're Baptist, Pentecostal, or Roman Catholic. If you are in the Body of Christ, then you should certainly be welcome" ("Media Spotlight," *Promise Keepers*, Albert Dager, p. 11).

The founder of Promise Keepers, Bill McCartney, echoed the same: "Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're Pentecostal. Do you love Jesus Hear me. Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're Catholic. Do you love Jesus . . . ?" ('94 Seize the Moment Men's Conference, Portland, Oregon, June 18, 1994).

Such statements as the above may give some "warm fuzzies," but they are not in accord with biblical teaching. God is mightily concerned with truth, correct doctrine, and the maintenance of the same. Many present-day Christians may not be, but God is. Over and over in the New Testament we are admonished to maintain sound doctrine. We are to "hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13). Believers are to be "nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:8). We are to "contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Promise Keepers is not obeying this scriptural emphasis.

There is far more to Christian fellowship than merely "loving Jesus." The "unity of the faith" (Eph. 4:13) has an intellectual and theological basis, not merely emotional. The apostle John was concerned that his spiritual children be found "walking in truth" (2 Jn. 4). Fellowship with other Christians has certain biblical limitations and guidelines. Sometimes there are doctrinal impediments to true fellowship. If a believer is in a church that is not true to God's Word (a church that by its teaching and associations is disobedient to truth), we ought not be fellowshiping with them as though there were nothing amiss.

"But," someone says, "some of the participants in Promise Keepers are true Christian brethren." This is true, but Paul gives us warning there are some true Christian brethren with whom we cannot fellowship in worship and service: "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat" (1 Cor. 5:11). Among other sins the matter of "idolatry" is mentioned. In commenting on this passage, Fred Moritz is correct in noting an idolater was one who participated in false worship. "The separation from a disobedient brother in this instance is on doctrinal as well as moral grounds" (*Be Ye Holy, The Call to Christian Separation*, p. 76).

Men whose center of worship is the Mass are coming to see the Lord Jesus Christ offered again in an "unbloody sacrifice" upon the altar of their church each time they worship. They participate in a church that believes the actual sacrifice for sins is repeated again and again. Until recent years, this heresy has been viewed as such by sound Christians of almost all denominations. Now there is an air of tolerance abroad, which is willing to view such a teaching as an allowable option.

HARMFUL IMPACT OF PROMISE KEEPERS

Promise Keepers is as serious an attack upon biblical separatism and fundamentalism as the church has seen since the rise of Billy Graham and his ecumenical evangelism a generation ago. It is going to cause major problems for pastors who are trying to maintain a biblical position.

This movement is promoting a disregard for the biblical teaching on ecclesiastical separation. This is difficult teaching to protect anyway, because the tide of public and evangelical opinion is running strongly against separatists. It is not fashionable to raise barriers and delineate theological truths. When a major group like Promise Keepers urges the Christian public to drop their “biases” and “prejudices” and rally together with all who call themselves Christians, many within fundamental churches are going to respond positively. Many think fundamentalists are too contentious anyway and will welcome an opportunity to break away from what they feel are overly-narrow parameters. In most of our separatist churches there are members, and in some cases even leaders, who do not really share the separatist convictions of the church. If the pastor does not promote Promise Keepers, these people are likely to promote division in the church.

Fundamental local churches that become active in the Promise Keepers movement will be exposing their men to teachings, philosophies, and activities contrary to the historic position of their church. While some men could attend rallies without being negatively influenced away from their church’s teachings, they would be relatively few in number. “Evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33), or as someone has correctly rendered it, “Bad company corrupts good character.” If men of a fundamental local church associate on a regular basis in worship with Roman Catholics and charismatics, their spiritual character is going to be corrupted, their discernment will be impaired, and their stand for the faith will be weakened. Since men are the leaders of the church, this in turn will cause the entire church to shift its position. It will be gradual, but it will happen. Pastors should consider well such consequences before promoting the program of Promise Keepers.

As men participate in Promise Keepers, they will be attracted to leaders who are not sound in their theology and practice. We have already mentioned a few of the speakers who are featured in Promise Keeper rallies. None of them are fundamentalists. They represent a wide spectrum of theological teaching that would be contrary to the teaching of most fundamental churches. It is already difficult for pastors of sound churches to protect their sheep from attractive and articulate persons like this. They are featured in many public settings, author best-selling books, and appear on Christian radio and television. A pastor does not need to give them further exposure to his people through Promise Keepers.

Participating in the programs of Promise Keepers opens the door for further and wider compromises. Once you begin to ignore, or at least minimize, the importance of sound doctrine in favor of certain perceived benefits, it is easier to continue doing this. Convictions begin to erode and justification is made for all manner of unholy alliances.

To involve the men of a fundamental church with a group that includes many

non-fundamentalists encourages a pragmatic and “feeling-oriented” basis of judgment rather than a scriptural one. We are living in a society that has largely replaced the objective with the subjective. The important point for many is “How do I feel about this?” If one “feels good” or “receives a blessing,” the activity must be acceptable. To sing rousing songs with 30,000 men in a stadium is exhilarating to many. They view it as an uplifting spiritual experience without stopping to consider theological ramifications. This places the judgments of men above the judgments of God. Our prayer and aim ought to be that of the psalmist: “Make me to go in the path of thy commandments, for therein do I delight” (Ps. 119:35). Our question should not be whether or not we are having a “meaningful experience,” but whether we are walking in the commandments of the Lord. Are the premises of Promise Keepers scriptural? This is the question.

To worship and cooperate with Roman Catholics and others who are in doctrinal error promotes the idea that correct doctrine is less important than fellowship. This is a popular concept today in Christendom. One is reminded of the slogan of an organization that was one of the forerunners of the World Council of Churches: “Doctrine divides, but service unites.” Many professing evangelicals today follow that philosophy, though they may not articulate it in that way. But it is not God’s emphasis. The early church continued “in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship . . .” (Acts 2:42). Doctrine is more important than fellowship and is listed first. Fellowship must be built on doctrine.

There is at least one more potential result from involvement with Promise Keepers which might be harmful. It removes the center of biblical instruction, at least in some matters, away from the local church. Where are men supposed to be receiving their spiritual instruction? The answer is clear from Scripture—from their pastor within the context of their own local church. This is not to say one cannot be blessed and helped occasionally through the ministry of someone outside the local church. However, the New Testament emphasizes the God-appointed pastor is to be the chief spiritual tutor.

“And he gave some . . . pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). The leaders of the Promise Keepers are not the pastors of the men to whom they minister. Whose responsibility is it to teach men about how to be fathers, husbands, and spiritual leaders? It is the responsibility of the pastor. Now some may say, “But my pastor does not teach these things.” Knowing something of the ministry of hundreds of pastors across the country, my view of such a statement would be negative. Observing the reactions of church people to similar situations over the years, perhaps I can speak with some helpfulness. People will travel hundreds of miles and pay lots of money to sit and watch a noted leader put diagrams on a huge overhead screen and, with much flourish and charisma, tell them the very same things their pastor has been telling them for years. They will return to their homes, however, and tell their friends, “I never heard such teaching! I learned so much!” The fact of the matter is they heard little their pastor had not already told them many times. But to hear it in a different, more “exotic” setting from someone who is supposed to be a noted “expert” somehow seemed to give it authority heretofore unknown.

Special problems can arise, however, when outside teachers, not part of the local church, give

instruction contrary to that given by the pastor. Bill McCartney, as an example, says it is perfectly all right to worship with Roman Catholics, yet a man's pastor says it is not. A conflict is immediately engaged, and to whom will the church member be loyal?

CONCLUSION

What should Bible-believing pastors and local churches do about the problems created by Promise Keepers? Several steps can be taken.

Inform your men of the dangers of the movement. We need not do it in a nasty spirit, but we need to do it. Many good men are taken in by such movements as this simply because they are not aware of the problems. It is the pastor's task to "guard the flock" as an overseer appointed by God (Acts 20:28). Guarding includes protecting the sheep from harmful influences.

Refuse to promote Promise Keepers. There will be great pressure on some pastors to promote Promise Keepers, but the pastor must be resolute. He should meet with any men who are concerned about the matter and endeavor, in a kind but biblical way, to show them why he cannot approve it.

Evaluate the ministry of your local church to men. Many churches may have an inadequate ministry to men and may need to recognize that weakness and make plans to correct it.

Examine your preaching and teaching. The pastor should examine his own preaching and teaching ministry. Is he preaching the "whole counsel of God," including truth calculated to make the men of his church spiritually stronger? Is he exposing his men to biblical truth that makes them better husbands, fathers, and church leaders? Pastors are human and can sometimes fall into patterns of preaching that may be lacking in certain truths.

Stand firm as a church. The men of the church, particularly the leaders, should not allow a movement like this to take the church off course from its historic and biblical position. Good laymen within our local churches should stand with the pastor and help other men see the dangers of becoming involved with Promise Keepers.

There needs to be much prayer, study of the Word of God, and a recommitment to the doctrinal specifics of the local church. We need to obey Ephesians 4:15—" . . . speaking the truth in love." When something is wrong, we need to say so but in a manner characterized by genuine Christian love.

"Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God . . . stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth" (Eph. 6:13,14).

"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13).

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