

PROMISE KEEPERS

An Evaluation

By Rev. C.A. Schouls

Evangelicalism is a movement that is characterized by constant change and flux. There is always something new on the evangelical market. Because of the amazing rapidity with which new things develop and because we, Reformed Christians, are usually not so fast to pick up on the latest gimmicks, we sometimes find ourselves a little behind the times in dealing with some of the movements that capture the imaginations of millions of Christians. In fact, often it is so that by the time *we* get around to dealing with such a subject, the more "with it" religious consumer has already moved on to the next item. I fear this is so a little bit with the subject for tonight, "Promise Keepers". Still, it certainly is not a movement of the past and what one finds quite often with such movements and our response to them is that the whole thing lingers on and percolates through the life of the congregation, often creating considerable unrest. It is to be hoped that the Promise Keepers movement has not done this in any of our churches. Nevertheless, it is good if we do know a little about it.

In evaluating this movement I want to begin with a few quotations from supporters and opponents. Some of these from the latter are not pretty:

"Talk about knuckle-draggers, here's a group of lovely individuals that you're sure to love. They call themselves "Promise Keepers" and their "Christian" message is one of male domination over the female as proscribed in the Christian mythologies. Oh no, not in so many words, no. They prefer to use the words "equal partners" who aren't exactly equal. They are told to "take back authority" over the woman."¹

"Promise Keepers is a product of the leadership of well-financed religious, conservative organizations designed to create a men-only movement to promote their ultra-conservative social and political agenda. Topping its list of priorities: women must "submit" to men."²

"Despite NOW's (National Organization for Women) contention that Promise Keepers is designed to foster a new breed of swaggering misogynists... the movement is more likely to produce the opposite: a generation of freshly sensitive husbands who are not afraid to unload the dishwasher or their tears."³

"What about Promise Keepers? This organization was born in 1992. It was 'spawned' out of the radical and very unscriptural Vineyard fellowship. It was founded by men. It is run by men, many of whom claim to get their directions directly from God, not from his word. They do not speak according to his word. They teach for doctrines the commandments and psychological babblings of men."⁴

"I see the PK movement as a Christian reaction to the modern diminishing of fatherhood and the impact of feminism... But there are some legitimate reservations and concerns"⁵

"PK is a heretical and dangerous movement. Our people must be warned against it and exhorted not to take part in it"⁶

The array of articles is truly bewildering; the range of opinions is staggering. The difficulty in analyzing and evaluating this movement is nearly overwhelming. One thing is certain: this movement stirs up reaction, strong and sometimes even violent, wherever it is active. According to TIME, the National Organization for Women has passed a resolution declaring Promise keepers "the greatest danger to women's rights" (October 6, 1997).

In my search for literature I could find only one well written book from a Reformed perspective: Beyond Promises. *A Biblical Challenge to Promise Keepers* by David Hagopian and Douglas Wilson (Canon Press, Moscow, Idaho.)

I have never attended a PK meeting and have no intention of doing so. I am not interested in the movement and found it hard to bring myself to work on this topic. I hope my lack of enthusiasm will not show through overly much. Why this lack of interest? Religious movements come and go and one rather tires of the excitement generated and soon dissipated. We have had, since World War 2, Moral Re-armament and Moral Majority; we have seen the Jesus movement of the 60's hippies and the Signs and Wonders of the charismatic movement. I have seen people excited about various movements and have seen people weeping over the wonder working powers of God through various self proclaimed vessels of the Holy Spirit. In most cases they have managed to create sharp discussion and even disharmony in the church. Whether in our circles we speak of neo Calvinism or of healing services - we have been touched by them. These movements have passed on and left their theological and psychological debris in their wakes; the church is still here. One is reminded of the Arab proverb about the dogs barking and the caravan moving on.

How does one evaluate this movement? Let us begin by reviewing its brief history; then we will briefly outline its Structure and Program. After that we will note further its impact. We will voice some concerns and point out some major errors and, finally, give some evaluation.

HISTORY

PK is the brain-child of Bill McCartney, then head-coach of the University of Colorado football team. In March of 1990, as a result of discussions with Dr. Dave Wardell, with whom McCartney was traveling to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes banquet, the idea of such a men's ministry was born. In the next several weeks, encouraged by others whom he sought out and who came together for prayer and planning, PK began to take shape. In the summer of 1990 McCartney spoke in a number of churches along the Front Range of Colorado. In his presentations McCartney emphasized the need for men of integrity—promise keepers. This was soon taken over as the name of the newly founded men's ministry.

PK has experienced phenomenal growth from its very beginning. Its first conference was held in June of 1991. 4,200 men gathered at the University of Colorado Coors Events Center to hear presentations developing the main theme of the conference, "Where Are The Men?" The men who attended were challenged to bring at least 12 other men with them to the 1992 PK conference.

The theme of the 1992 PK conference was "What Makes A Man?" 1,500 clergymen and lay leaders gathered for the first National Leadership Conference, and 22,000 men from nearly every state convened at the University of Colorado's Folsom Field.

The goal of the 1993 PK conference was to fill Folsom Field. The conference theme was, "Face To Face." Over 50,000 men attended. The second National Leadership Conference was attended by over 3,000 pastors and lay leaders.

1994 was a significant year for PK. This year the conference schedule was expanded to include other cities. Besides Boulder, the conference theme, "Seize The Moment," was carried to Anaheim, CA; Boise, ID; Indianapolis, IN; Denton, TX; and Portland, OR. Over a quarter of a million men packed into the sold out stadiums to be a part of PK.

In 1995 PK brought its theme, "Raise The Standard," to nation wide venues. Once more, stadiums were packed and the messages presented enthusiastically received. Over 750,000 men attended the 1995 PK conferences, including over 60,000 pastors.

Plans for 1996 were reported in the November 6, 1995 issue of Time magazine. PK "... is in the process of reserving 23 stadiums for 1996, with several more possible; the intended audience approaches 1.5 million. The group's total budget, \$64 million for 1995, is expected to jump commensurately." In 1997 PK planned its own million man march on Washington, DC.⁷

The financial figures provided by PK are staggering:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Staff</u>	<u>Budget</u>
1993	22	\$4 million
1994	150	\$26 million
1995	300	\$64 million
1996	360	\$97 million
1997	452	\$117 million

What these figures do not reflect is the crippling financial crisis which occurred in 1997. When founder Bill McCartney insisted the \$60 entrance fee to public events be dropped, the immediate effect was such that there was not enough money to continue to pay all the staff. McCartney then decreed "If some cannot be paid, none will be paid" and the entire staff of over 400 people was fired. This precipitated a "faith crisis" which was resolved by a "faith response" from churches all over America sending a donation of \$ 1000 each. In short order, over \$4 million came in. Crisis solved. "Needless to say McCartney and the PK leadership have always seen successful fundraising schemes as God's provision and seal on their ministry."⁸

Apparently, also, the PK version of the Million Man March did not quite live up to its billing although an estimated 400,000 men were gathered for the "Stand in the Gap" Rally (theme taken from Ezekiel 22:30.)

The aims and goals of the organization are expressed in the following statements:

Promise Keepers Is:

Promise Keepers (PK) is a Christian outreach to men. Through stadium conferences, educational seminars, resource materials, and local churches, PK encourages men to live godly lives and to keep seven basic promises of commitment to God, their families, and fellow man. Promise Keepers seeks to unite Christian men of all races, denominations, ages, cultures, and socio-economic groups, believing that accountable relationships among men are critical in helping one another become promise keepers in their relationships with God, their wives, their children, and each other.

Promise Keepers Is Not:

Promise Keepers is not merely a series of stadium events, but rather, a year-round outreach to men through the local church. PK is not a membership or dues-paying organization, but is part of a larger movement of Christian men becoming more active throughout their local churches. Furthermore, PK is not a political or partisan organization, nor is it affiliated with any denomination. Finally, Promise Keepers does not promote a self-help or self-improvement philosophy, but encourages men to commit every aspect of their lives to Jesus Christ.⁹

Although strictly an American product, PK has moved into Canada, with an office in Burlington, on the North Service Road. They have moved as well into Britain, Australia and New Zealand. During the course of this year, the PK movement was expected to take off in a big way in Britain. Led by Anglican curate Rev. Peter Howell-Jones and with the backing (but not the formal support) of the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as the Evangelical Alliance, it was expected that the movement would have little difficulty taking over from its British precursor, "Menmeet UK". But, wherever PK enters, it sets off warning bells and not only from the radical feminist and left of center political groups.

STRUCTURE

If we look for the reasons for PK's growth, we must look at the structure of their organization. In typical American style, it is a well-oiled machine. The conferences have dramatically increased in

size and scope: from a beginning conference attendance of 4,200 in 1991 it has grown to the point that this year (1998) they hosted pastors conferences for 30,000 clergy at nine free regional clergy conferences around the U.S. The first three men's conferences of 1998 were held in May in Detroit, Little Rock, Ark. and Los Angeles, hosting an estimated 80,000 men so far. Sixteen further conferences were scheduled in this year. If the attendance figures for the first three may be taken as representative, the total attendance figure for this year might be expected to hover around the 600,000 mark in the USA alone. This may be down from 1995 but is still a considerable number of men. But these highly visible conferences are not all there is to the movement.

PK also hosts "Wake Up Calls" - a type of mini conference which is to prepare the way for the Big One as well as bring men together who have a heart for men's ministry. Further, there are "Leadership Conferences" designed especially for pastors, attended by thousands of ministers (1994:45,000, 1998:30,000).

In addition to these visible conferences, PK is also forming a structure to strengthen contact with the local churches. Through its "Point Man/Ambassador Network liaisons are formed with local churches. Point Men may be pastors or lay people in any given church who work with their respective Ambassadors, whose aim is to promote the value of Promise Keepers to the church and the community. Point Men are described as "the vital link between PK and the local church" while Ambassadors are the critical link between Point Men and the Promise Keepers.

The chain of reporting is Point Man -> Ambassador -> local Task Force (a group of local men from diverse backgrounds who have met for prayer for 3 - 6 months and who have 'signed-on' with PK) -> State Steering Committee -> Regional Directors -> National Office. An impressive organization and it seems to work well.¹⁰

PROGRAM

Although the program of this movement can be considered at various levels, according to the structure outline above, we will consider the most public aspect of their program as the main one. All the other programs do nothing but serve the propagation of the *Seven Promises*. These promises are:

1. A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.
3. A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
4. A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values.
5. A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.
6. A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
7. A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20).

This set of 7 Promises, to which every Promise Keeper must subscribe, is the public face of the movement. We will come back to these promises in the voicing of some of our concerns.

Underlying the structure and philosophy of the movement is a theology expressed in the Statement of Faith:

1. We believe that there is one God eternally existing in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the Bible is God's written revelation to man and that it is verbally inspired, authoritative, and without error in the original manuscripts.

3. We believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles, death on the cross to provide for our redemption, bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven, present ministry of intercession for us, and His return to earth in power and glory.
4. We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, that He performs the miracle of the new birth in an unbeliever and indwells believers, enabling them to live a godly life.
5. We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. Only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation which was made possible by His death and resurrection, can that alienation be removed.

Also to this we will return with a few critical remarks later.

IMPACT

If we are to evaluate such a movement, we must do so honestly. Then, we first wish to point out some positive aspects of the impact made. As we remark on conditions in the church at large, we must not mistakenly assume that none of these conditions are present or a potential danger to our own churches.

Hagopian and Wilson correctly identify the following aspects:"

1. PK has correctly identified one of the greatest needs of the hour by pointing to the fact that the churches in our nation have been overwhelmed by a crisis in masculine confidence - "sissification". Women have taken over positions of leadership in the churches because men have failed in their duties. The current crisis over the place and role of women in the church cannot be understood apart from recognizing this development. Men all too often have abdicated their role as head of the covenant unit, the family, and have failed in leading their families into the ways of the Lord. In its most extreme form, this phenomenon is seen in men totally jettisoning their responsibilities and leaving their families. One of the greatest and most tragic problems of our society is the collapse of the stable, two parent, nuclear family.
2. Promise Keepers has made the right enemies and on the proper scale. Secular feminists, activists and anti-Christian forces are nervous when they see so many men avowing a return to traditional values. The vehemence of their rhetoric indicates the degree to which the devil must be roaring at the sight of hundreds of thousands of men confessing their sins, praying and singing together, and making promises to wives and children that they will from now on carry out the role which the Bible demands of them. The rhetoric is not only shrill; it is blasphemous and vitriolic:

"How's this for the height of evil?"

The Institute for First Amendment Studies reports that the Promise Keepers cult "plan to state a million man prayer rally in Washington, DC next fall. According to Cincinnati pastor Lee Crossfield, the plan is to bring a million white male Christians to Washington to repent the sin of racism. When asked if they planned to bring a million men to San Francisco next year to repent the sin of gay bashing, Crossfield replied, "Homosexuality is a sin."

Can you imagine anything more evil than that? Knowing that they are a bunch of racist, homophobic, anti-women bigots, they seek to head-off their critics who will point out the lack of blacks among their cult by "apologizing" for being racist bigots! Amazing. And millions of Christians will buy it, of course, just as they continue to buy Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, David Duke, and Jimmy Swaggart. Then when confronted with the absurdity of their hatred and bigotry, the cult makes it worse for themselves by glib, hate-filled, bigoted remarks.¹²

One does not honour such remarks with a reply; however, it is clear that sore points have been

touched. What is expressed here can, in essence, also be found in any feminist pronouncement about this movement.

3. Promise Keepers is trying to break out of the cultural ghetto to which Christianity has been consigned by our post-modern secular world. The movement demonstrates a real hunger for something more than the bland form of Christianity which has allowed itself to be pushed about by these forces. It realises that the great crisis of our culture and age is a spiritual crisis and it recognises that men's past lack of concern for spiritual realities is now demanding a high price.
4. In line with this, it must be acknowledged that this movement is teaching men that Christ is not only Saviour but also Lord of their homes, families, jobs and communities. Although we are not able nor called to verify the authenticity of conversions, reports of changes in the lives of many men cannot just be ignored.
5. Although according to some statistics, visible minorities make up a very small percentage of the movement, PK is hitting hard at racism. In doing so it has pointed out a painful reality in American Christianity: there is no place more segregated than the neighbourhood church on any Sunday morning. PK has called this a grievous sin and speaks often of reconciliation needed on this score. Although, according to their own figures, 90% of their following is Caucasian, 38% of the staff belongs to a visible minority, according to TIME magazine.
6. Finally, as noted in the section dealing with the movement's history, it has been able to reach hundreds of thousands of men with the Word of God. Although we have problems with various aspects of this, we must recognise that this has been done. When we consider these aspects of their impact, we must say Promise

Keepers has done its job and done it well. However, to think that, therefore, we can give it our unqualified support, is another matter. We have grave concerns.

CONCERNS

Our basic concern is doctrinal and theological. The entire movement, although it has many good aspects to it, is based on a flawed theological system: that system which grants man a free will and the ability to do something towards his salvation.

Now, in examining this further, we must first take note of a controversial issue regarding their Statement of Faith. PK has been accused of adjusting their 5th point in order to remove the doctrine of Justification by Faith with a view to accommodating Roman Catholic input. However closely I study the change made, I cannot find ground for this criticism. They have, themselves, provided the following answer to this point:

"The old version of tenet, number five read: "We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. That alienation can be removed only by accepting through faith alone God's gift of salvation which was made possible by Christ's death."

Tenet number five of the Statement of Faith was revised in 1996, due to a simple desire on the part of Promise Keepers' Board of Directors to improve and clarify the commonly understood Biblical terms of salvation. The current version of tenet number five reads:

"We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. Only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation which was made

possible by his death and resurrection, can that alienation be removed."

The revision has not altered the meaning of this key principle in any way. Our objective

was only to bring more clarity to this important fundamental truth of Christianity. The revision also expresses Ephesians 2: 8,9 more accurately than the old version, thus we felt we were being more true to Scripture. Promise Keepers believes that salvation is a free gift from God and cannot be earned by any human effort."¹⁴

If one wants to find fault with this statement, it would be in its inherent Arminianism, not in the fact that Justification by Faith was present in the first draft and removed from the second. It simply is not so. There may have been other accommodations to Roman Catholicism of which I am not aware; I am hard pressed to find it here.

Nevertheless, there are doctrinal concerns and issues which, to my mind, tragically and, if uncorrected, fatally flaw the movement. Basic to these is the error of Arminianism; the belief that man, in some way, is cooperative with God in his salvation. That system of error does, indeed, detract from the truth of Justification by Faith alone. The doctrines of sovereign grace are compromised. While PK sometimes speaks of sovereign grace and total depravity in a way which, taken at face value, sounds Scriptural, the fact that other statements are made which totally belie such truths and that men speak at their meetings who are avowed enemies of these precious doctrines, points out the inconsistency in this movement.

To name a few examples:

PK coddles Roman Catholicism. But Rome is an enemy of sovereign grace! PK utilises speakers like Bill Bright and Luis Palau. But Bright and Palau are blatant Arminians! PK is heavily influenced by the modern charismatic movement. But the charismatics deny the sovereignty of God in salvation and teach that faith is in the ability of every man! Some of the leading figures in PK are proponents of "Christian Psychology." But their teaching of self-love, self-esteem, and self-improvement inveighs against the Reformed conception of the grace of God and the sinfulness of man.

In his speech at the PK rally in the Pontiac Silverdome in April of 1995, Bill McCartney defined the work of the Holy Spirit this way: "The Holy Spirit calls out the best that is in us."¹⁵

Not only are such statements confusing and inaccurate, they are blasphemous in that they really deny the sufficiency of the work of Christ.

The movement is led by men who are not theologically astute or trained; it has been weaned, as stated, in a church setting where doctrine is not highly appreciated. The resulting lack of doctrinal insensitivity (a thing apparently desired, considering their many public statements that all we need is oneness in Christ) has given rise to various areas of concern. I mention the following:

1. Promoting Unity at the Expense of Truth:¹⁶

PK intends to be an ecumenical force. This is an expressed purpose of PK and a theme that is reiterated at nearly every PK event. Praise is heaped on PK because of the impact that it has had in breaking down denominational barriers. "Brothers" out of every conceivable church dotting the American ecclesiastical landscape are brought together by PK. At the PK conferences they hold hands in prayer and fellowship, sing together, share with one another, and resolve to stand by each other. Promise #6 to which PK commit themselves is "... to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of Biblical unity." The existence of separate denominations of churches is viewed as an evil. Commitment to denominational distinctiveness is a barrier to true brotherhood among Christians. Adherence to the doctrinal distinctiveness of one's denomination is as serious a sin as racial prejudice.

In his speech at the 1994 Promise Keepers "Seize The Moment" conference in Portland, OR, McCartney proclaimed:

Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're white. Do you love Jesus; are you born of the Spirit of God?

Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're black. Do you love Jesus; are you born of the Spirit of God?

Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're brown. Do you love Jesus; are you born of the Spirit of God?

Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're Pentecostal. Do you love Jesus; are you born of the Spirit of God?

Hear me: Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're Catholic. Do you love Jesus; are you born of the Spirit of God?

This disregard for doctrine and doctrinal distinctive shows itself in the array of speakers utilized at the PK meetings. Featured on the same platform together are Arminians, like Bill Bright and Luis Palau; Pentecostals, like Jack Hayford and Chuck Smith; Dispensationalists, like Charles Swindoll and Joe Stowell. Nearly every viewpoint is accepted; none are excluded. Even Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are cordially included in PK.

For the sake of unity, criticism of divergent positions is avoided by PK. In its manual describing the duties of Ambassadors, the following caution is issued:

"Because Promise Keepers is committed to building relational bridges, Ambassadors must avoid negative political, doctrinal, and denominational remarks and discussions. In some cases, an Ambassador will encounter a church that is outside his personal comfort zone in terms of cultural or denominational emphases. If so, he should remember that he does not have to answer every question."¹⁷

Any disregard for or down playing of the truth cannot be squared with the Scriptures. According to I Tim. 3:15, the church is called to be pillar and ground of the truth. The Apostle John expresses that he has no greater joy than to hear that his children walk in the truth, III John 4. It is the truth, Jesus in John 8:32, that makes men free.

2. Compromising with Roman Catholicism:¹⁸

This lack of concern for the truth, born of a spiritual and ecclesiastical climate which has little regard for confessional statements and doctrinal preaching, has as one of its fruits a rather compromising attitude towards Rome. It is commonly reported and advertised that the Catholic is invited to become a PK as a brother in Christ. The leader of PK, Bill McCartney, says that PK does not care whether or not men are Catholics. Dr. Jack Hayford, author of the PK rally text *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* writes, "Redeeming worship centers on the Lord's Table. Whether tradition celebrates it as Communion, Eucharist, the Mass, or the Lord's Supper, we are all called to this centerpiece of Christian worship" (p. 19). These rites, in their respective denominations, are not at all comparable. The Catholic rites are blasphemous. In addition, the Catholic man is bound in dead liturgy. Against the command of Christ, he calls his priest Father. He believes he was born again when he was baptized as an infant. He prays to Mary, whom he calls the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of God, for grace and forgiveness. He buys mass cards and lights candles and prays so that dead people can be saved. He believes he is headed for purgatory where he will be punished for his sins. His pope carries as much authority with him as the Bible does with the Christian. These beliefs are all tragically mistaken. Certainly, we love the Catholic. He needs to be loved, so he can be saved. He needs to be loved right into the kingdom with the truth of the Gospel as it is presented in the Bible. But a PK is not allowed to share the Gospel with him because the PK has taken a vow to embrace Catholicism as an acceptable denomination. Evangelism not allowed. Evangelism puts the Promise Keepers organization in jeopardy. PK prefers to seal the Catholic's fate as a lost soul. The PK member, then, cannot keep both promises 7 and 6. No wonder Christ warned us against taking oaths more than saying simply yea or nay.

A good indication of how Catholics and members of other un-saved denominations feel insulated at PK meetings comes from a study of PK done by priest Christian Van Liefde for the

Catholic church as quoted by Bobgan and Bobgan in "Promise Keepers, Catholics, and Mormons... Together," 1995:

"...there is no 'doctrinal issue which should cause concern to the Catholic Church.' Promise Keepers places a very strong emphasis on returning to your own church congregation or parish and becoming an active layman... There is no attempt at proselytizing or drawing men away from their faith to another church."

3. Usurping the Prerogatives which God has given to the church:¹⁹

Apparently PK has the highest regard for the prerogatives of the instituted church.

"Promise #5: A Man and His Church. A PK is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources." Pastors and church leaders are praised and prayed for at PK gatherings. But the truth of the matter is that PK has a low view of the instituted church and is itself in competition with the church of Jesus Christ.

That is plain from the fact that PK views itself as a "ministry," a "men's ministry." PK engages in public teaching of the Word of God. PK employs men and women who are engaged full-time in the work of PK. And yet, this whole "ministry" stands outside of the church, is not supervised directly by the church, nor directly accountable to the church. PK is accountable to itself, its own Board of Directors. That makes PK a para-church organization.

God has given one organization the calling to engage in the public preaching of His Word. That organization is the church. It has the task to bring out the Word; it has to bring this out at home and abroad; it alone has the right to ask of its members to give an accounting of their spiritual lives, their battles, losses and wounds. In the course of their lives the people of God make promises, solemn promises. But they do not make these promises before a human organization lately sprung up, not even when that organization has so many promising aspects to it.

4. Dabbling in Psychobabble:

The term "psychobabble" is of fairly recent origin and refers to the current craze for spouting all kinds of psychological terminology by counselors, pastors and lay people who really have not that grasp of this field of study which is needed in order to make authoritative statements. Talk of low self-esteem; loving yourself; forgiving yourself, etc. is all too common an example of this.

As B. M. Rocine points out:

"Part of the PK method includes an **unholy mix** of New Age and Jungian approaches to psychology with Biblical imagery. For instance, Robert Hicks' *The Masculine Journey* sells like ice cream on a summer day at PK rallies. Hicks writes, "We are called to worship God as phallic kinds of guys" (p. 51). In his book he advocates celebration of a young man's loss of innocence: "I'm sure many would balk at my thought of celebrating the experience of sin... Instead of jumping all over them when they have their first experience with sex or drugs, we could look upon this as a teachable moment and a rite of passage" (p. 177). His workbook, also sold at rallies, asks men to share with each other about the phallic initiation rites they have participated in. Hicks is not alone in his twisted focus. Explaining the three reasons for the covenant of circumcision in the Old Testament, so-called Christian psychologist Jack Hayford taught at the PK Anaheim rally in 1994: 1) God wants to touch men's very identity as men; 2) God wants to reach out and touch men's secret and private parts; and 3) God wants to touch men's creative parts."²⁰

Although PK has taken distance from the Hicks book, it has done so in a very polite way and not at all in keeping with the robust approach which it tells men to use in confessing sin. In fact, if PK is really regretful about its former endorsement of this book, it should say so unequivocally.

5. Undermining the Biblical notion of marriage and family:

Perhaps this is the most painful criticism of all. On any of the others, PK might be able to argue back or to say, "Yes, we need to do some work here". On the issue of marriage and family they have, as it were, staked their lives. How can we say that they are undermining these institutions? In order to answer this, we must consider the second promise: A Man and His Mentors. A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few good men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.

In his introduction to this promise, Randy Phillips, the president of the movement, writes:

"The fact is, if you want to become all God wants you to be, you need at least one other Christian brother to help you get there."

Part of the PK program is involvement in small men's groups. These groups are encounter groups. In these groups men are asked pointed questions about their financial, social, spiritual, and sexual lives-no holds barred! They must open up and talk freely and frequently with these other men concerning the intimacies of their relationship with their wives.

It is especially this latter part which presents problems. This is a violation of the marriage bed. It is a betrayal of one's spouse and the exclusive relationship that one ought to have with that spouse. The encounter group and the accountability factor are something quite popular in evangelical circles. Now, there is nothing wrong with a man having a close friend and confidante into whom he can confide. In some cases, it may even be beneficial for a married man to confide in a friend things which he feels he cannot discuss with his wife; however, this fact in itself is indicative of a problem in the marriage. But the further weakness with this set up is that it may promote a spiritual climate such as has, on occasion, been found in the conventicles of another era: a climate in which there is on the one hand a form of spiritual "me-too-ism" in which men readily agree with or try to outdo each other and, on the other hand, a reign of spiritual terror in which a few men sit in judgement of others. This dangerous area should not be entered upon by Christians.

A further critique in the area of family relations is that the PK movement seems all too ready to accept the reality of divorce without much effort at setting right what was originally wrong. We realise that one can hardly counsel a couple to dissolve a congenial current marriage, entered upon before becoming believers, in order to restore an earlier marriage, broken on unscriptural grounds. At the same time, we do find the PK's ready acceptance of such cases somewhat disconcerting, to say the least.

Although much more could be said regarding various errors, concerns and inconsistencies, we must draw to a close.

EVALUATION

Whatever we evaluate, we must do so by the one infallible standard, the Word of God. When we lay the straight edge of that Word next to the promises and the programs of the Promise Keepers, we find that there is considerable deviation from that standard. However, that does not take away the fact that there are a number of good things about this movement.

Positive Elements

We have already mentioned six positives under the heading "Impact". These were:

1. Identifying the need of the hour, namely, that men have neglected their duties as husbands and fathers;
2. Evoking opposition from some of the most strident enemies of Christianity: secular feminists, left wing activists, etc;
3. The attempt to break free from the mould imposed upon Christianity by the post modern and materialistic world;
4. Teaching men that Christ is Lord over all;
5. Recognising and attempting to deal with the sin of racism.

6. Reaching thousands of men with the Word of God.

We now only list these again in order to recognize these as positives. However, there are also many negatives.

Negative Elements

As stated earlier, the underlying and rather all pervasive negative element is the movement's theologically imprecise and sloppy statements. This is so common of many North American movements and betrays the pragmatic mind set of this society. Concerned about results rather than means, they forge ahead with whatever works. Because our entire society is of this mind set and because Christendom in North America knows little else, none but a handful of Reformed precisionists will have problems with this. It is also because of this prevailing mental climate, in which men as Bill McCartney, a former football coach, work, that they would be quite bewildered by the fact that other Christians would question their methods and statements. In doing so, we wish to avoid the extreme statements of some: "I hear the footsteps of anti-Christ"²¹; or "Satan's Latest Tool of Deception"²². This does not mean that it cannot be a tool of deception nor be part of the prelude to the coming of anti-Christ. I submit, however, that the penchant of some to label everything in absolute terms is rather simplistic and really does injustice to John's warning that the anti-Christ is always with us during this last day.

We would rather go with the milder yet more penetrating analysis of men such as Hagopian and Wilson in their book Beyond Promises who give quite an in depth examination of the movement.

A few things should be obvious:

- Promise Keeping is a serious business and the Bible warns that we make no rash promises of any kind. The warnings in the Sermon on the Mount should be taken to heart:
Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shall perform unto the Lord thine oaths:

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:
Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.
Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.
But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil. (Matt 5:33-37).
- Reformed people who have made the promises of Public confession of Faith, marriage and/or baptism need no further promises to live the Christian life.
- The making of such promises as proposed by the PK movement does tend to project the image that our Christianity and Christian service is the result of what we do, rather than it being the fruit of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.
- Due to theological imprecision and its resulting inconsistencies, some of the promises can be in conflict with others. What if the obedience to God's Word (promise 1) means we must keep denominational barriers intact? This would be *disobedience* to promise 6. If forced to choose between truth and unity, a Christian must always choose truth. Other possible inconsistencies have already been mentioned: the commitment to promise 2 (mentorship) and to 3 (purity) and 4 (marriage) could be come jeopardized in the small group confessional situation.

I wholeheartedly agree with the challenge put forth by Hagopian and Wilson in their book and would like to quote it in its entirety as a fitting final word. They call on the movement and its adherents to do the following:

- Recover and proclaim the true gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone;
- Understand the meaning of true, biblical masculinity by calling men to lead, not to follow their wives and children in every way under God and according to His Word, and by challenging men to relate to one another as men;
- Turn from the covenant of works and cling to the covenant of grace as the only means of relating to God and embrace the covenantal institutions of the family, the church, and the civil order as the only such institutions ordained by God;
- Recognize where psychology clashes with Scripture and remain faithful to the true biblical message, even when that means rejecting psychology as a false gospel;
- Demonstrate true integrity by confessing a lack of discretion in promoting *The Masculine Journey* and by repudiating the book publicly; (*this has been done but in a rather lukewarm manner. CAS*²³)
- Focus on truth, not technique, in establishing its future goals, conferences, and studies, all the while remaining faithful in its exposition of the Word of God;
- Avoid unbiblical oaths and vows and warn men that it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay;
- Worship God in spirit and truth only as He has prescribed in His Word of truth and cling to that Word of truth as the all-sufficient and self-sufficient standard for everything that is to be believed and done;
- Promote honesty and intimacy in marriage by teaching men to seek forgiveness from their wives for sins committed against their wives, not using small groups as a substitute for the honesty and intimacy that is to characterize the marital relationship;
- Teach that purity is not merely a matter of outward conduct but of inward thoughts and desires and ensure that what is taught is consistent across the board and down the line;
- Exhort men to become the husbands and fathers that God has called them to be, even when that may be at odds with the desires of their wives and children;
- Support the local church in word and deed by doing nothing to rival it as the primary institution for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the ordinances (sacraments - CAS), by encouraging small groups to form only under the oversight of the local church, and by retracting the covenant of confidentiality as an unbiblical vow;
- Promote true reconciliation and unity in the church, which can only be built upon the rock solid foundation of the truth of the gospel and cease from promoting the unbiblical concept of reparational reconciliation (the idea that we can ask for forgiveness of past sins committed by others, particularly in the area of race relations [cf Beyond Promises p.235]); and,

- View the vocational calling of men as one important way men bear witness for Christ by teaching the priesthood of all believers.

CONCLUSION

Promise Keepers, as a movement, is a force being recognized by the world primarily because it has pointed at some of the darling sins and philosophical weaknesses of the world. Unfortunately, however, the pointing has not always been done accurately and the suggested solutions have been even less than accurately stated.

From the point of view of the believer with his limited perspective but with access to the Truth of the Word of God, this movement needs fundamental corrective surgery if it is to be a lasting power for good. If this does not take place; worse, if this is rejected, it may prove to be or become a tool of deception. If the leadership would learn from men such as Wilson and Hagopian, men who have pointed out their errors in love and not in strident terms, it may well be that God will honour His own work and use this as a tool for revival on a scale quite unprecedented. Who of us would dare say God can not do this?

As for Promise Keepers and people like us - we really do not need them. Mass rallies, mass singing and mass tears may make a great emotional impact but it is as a light summer shower; the results are not lasting. Meanwhile:

- Until there is evidence that this movement is serious about correcting its errors, we ought not attend their rallies for attending is supporting.
- Should there be evidence that they reject constructive criticism, we ought not only add our voice to those calling them to repentance but also take strenuous action to oppose their ways, which must then be termed as "wicked".
- Those in our churches who have been infected by their enthusiasm should be warned to keep their opinions to themselves.
- Our concern for them should be expressed in prayer to God who is able to do great things, far above our expectation.
- Should there be positive developments along the lines laid out, a cautious but friendly approach to the movement may yield fruit to the glory of God.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Internet: *the Promise Keeper cult: Football stadiums full of knuckle-draggers*
- 2 Internet: Alfred Ross and Lee Cokorinos: *Promise Keepers: A Real Challenge from the Right* - in a publication from NOW (National Organization for Women)
- 3 U.S. News article, *My wife told me to go*.10/06/97
- 4 Internet: The Grace Proclamator and Promulgator Vol.XIII, No.1 January 1, 1997
- 5 Article by Wayne Camp, *The Promise Keepers: Satan's Latest Tool of Deception*
- 6 Johan D. Tangelder: *Then: Elders in the gate; Now. Ministers, Elders in the Arena, Seeking Inspiration*. Article in *Christian Renewal* May 13, 1996
- 7 Internet: Rev. Ron Cammenga, in a paper delivered at a (Protestant Reformed) ministers' conference, Pella, Iowa, March 5, 1996
- 8 Taken from Cammenga's paper and from PK Website
- 9 *The Journal of the Christian Research Network*, Summer 1998, p.25
- 10 Internet: *The Official PK Website*
- 11 David Hagopian & Douglas Wilson: *Beyond Promises, A Biblical Challenge to Promise Keepers*. Canon Press, Moscow, Idaho, 1996. p29 ff.
- 12 op. cit. p23ff.
- 13 Internet: *the Promise Keepers cult*
- 14 TIME, Canadian Edition, October 6, 1997: *The Promise Keepers*.
- 15 Internet: *The Official PK Website*.
- 16 Internet: Cammenga's paper.
- 17 Internet: op.cit.
- 18 "The Ambassador" (Boulder, CO: Promise Keepers), p. 3 - quoted by Cammenga.
- 19 Internet: Website of *The Living Word Church*. Article by B. M. Rocine
- Internet: Cammenga's paper.

20 Internet: Website of *The Living Word Church*. Article by B. M. Rocine
21 Internet: Cammenga's paper
22 Internet: The Grace Proclamator and Promulgator Vol.XIII, No.1 January 1, 1997
25 Article by Wayne Camp, *The Promise Keepers: Satan's Latest Tool of Deception*
From the Official PK Website: Several passages in *The Masculine Journey* by
Robert Hicks (1993, NavPress) could be understood in more than one way. This led
to controversies that neither the author nor Promise Keepers could have foreseen,
and which have proven to be a distraction from the focus of our ministry. Portions of
the book prompted *a wide range of interpretations and responses Involving theological issues*
which Promise Keepers does not feel a mission or calling to resolve. While theological debate
can be healthy, this was not Promise Keepers' intended purpose for offering this publication.
Controversy surrounding the book also led to a marked decline in demand among our
constituents, further defeating its purpose as a PK resource. Therefore, Promise
Keepers discontinued marketing and distributing The Masculine Journey.