

Shall We Participate in “Promise Keepers”?

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Introduction¹

Perhaps the best way to get this subject before us is to examine the seven promises – the creed – to which those who are members of Promise Keepers must commit themselves:

1. A Promise Keeper is committed to honor Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to his word in the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. A Promise Keeper is committed to pursue vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs his brothers to help him keep his promises.
3. A Promise Keeper is committed to practice spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
4. A Promise Keeper is committed to build strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.
5. 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.
6. A Promise Keeper is committed to reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
7. A Promise Keeper is committed to influence his world, being obedient to the great commandment (Mark 12:30–31) and the great commission (Matthew 29:19–20).²

One of the tragedies of the past four decades is the severe deterioration of the normal, Scriptural concept of the home and family. *Single-parent family* has thereby entered our vocabulary. Although several factors have produced this crisis, the failure of husbands and fathers to be the men God requires them to be is unarguably a principal cause. Also, without argument, this dire problem begs for a solution beyond mere legislation (as necessary as this legislation is) which attempts to force fathers to pay child support.

Promise Keepers, which began less than a decade ago, has attempted to call attention to husband-father responsibilities and to encourage men to accept them. Because of this emphasis the organization has attracted nation-wide attention (both negative and positive) and has experienced almost explosive growth. It has attracted crowds numbering from tens to hundreds of thousands of men to its rallies. It has spawned several books. Its growth has required the employment of over five hundred people to administer its activities. The operation of its offices requires an annual budget of almost \$100 million. It has attracted both praise and involvement by some of our brethren.

What shall we say about Promise Keepers? Is this an organization the Lord's people should participate in and promote or is it another interdenominational ecumenical fad with which we can have no fellowship? To answer this question, we will briefly study the origin and aim, the prime movers, the organization and methodology, and the doctrinal emphases of Promise Keepers.

Origin and Aims of Promise Keepers

Promise Keepers, the brainchild of Bill McCartney (former head football coach at the University of Colorado) in conjunction with Dave Wardell, began in 1990 in Colorado.³ Its first major rally attracted 4,200 men to a stadium in Boulder in 1992.⁴ The next year they drew 50,000 men to Folsom Stadium at the University of Colorado. Since then it has moved into almost every area of the country, assembling similar-sized crowds at more than a dozen rallies per year. In 1996, its banner-year for attendance thus far, Promise Keepers drew 1.1 million men to 22 stadium events.⁵ Besides the regional rallies in 1997, a national rally, billed as "Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men," was staged on October 4, in Washington, D.C. Observers estimated that 500,000 attended (including some of our brethren, one of whom was a featured speaker – but more about this fact later).

Although this organization originated with the aforementioned men and continues to be administered by men, its leaders credit God with its inception and its progress. Promise Keepers is "...a sovereign move of God's Spirit.... God has positioned Promise Keepers to seize this opportunity and to ignite a worldwide movement calling men to conviction, integrity, and action."⁶ In this connection, it is appropriate to observe that God is not responsible for everything for which men give Him credit. It is one thing to make a wild assertion or to express a desire concerning God's favor on one's activities. It is quite another to prove that it is so by the teaching of God's inspired and infallible revealed will.

As I previously indicated, apparently the seminal idea in the minds of McCartney and Wardell was to begin a movement that would teach and encourage men to assume their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Surely, in a day when so many men have failed in these crucial areas, no one can fault this motive or aim. However, we do question (for reasons to be discussed later) the contribution the Promise Keepers' approach makes to the grave problems relating to men who shirk their family responsibilities.

However, as the movement has grown in momentum and size, it has also broadened its aims. For example, ecumenism and unity have become major thrusts: “We believe that we have a God-given mission to **unite Christian men** who are separated by race, geography, culture, **denomination**, and economics [emph. DM].”⁶ Promise number six, as quoted above, states this same goal of reaching “...beyond any racial and **denominational** barriers to demonstrate the power of **biblical unity** [emph. DM].” The specific purpose of the 1996 Promise Keepers Clergy Conference for Men is stated as follows: “This gathering will offer men in pastoral ministry a unique occasion to gather in a focused, corporate environment to **pursue biblical unity in the body of Christ**.... Together we will surrender to His will and seek His strategy for **toppling the walls dividing the Church** [emph. DM].”⁷ One does not read much of their material or listen long to their speakers without hearing the unity mantra strongly emphasized. Promise Keepers advocates the pursuit of unity **before** and **apart from** respect for Truth, as I will subsequently demonstrate. The Bible always places a premium on Truth, even if it causes division or disunity (John 6:60–61, 66–69; 8:32). Again, unity is a Biblical theme and a worthy aim, but only within the limits of the teaching of the New Testament. Promise Keepers’ leadership either does not know or does not respect (or both) Biblical teaching on fellowship and unity, as I will subsequently show.

Another aim of Promise Keepers is evangelism. The rally leaders and organizers urge the “Christian” men who will be attending to bring non-Christian men with them and to make an attempt to “convert” them. A rally attendant reported the following concerning the speech given by John Wesley-White, an evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association:

[His] message was evangelistic, anticipating that many men who had never committed their lives to Christ would come with Christian friends and that many backsliders would need to renew their commitment.... Volunteer counselors were down front to meet them and pray for them. Efforts were made to get names and addresses to make follow-up possible.⁸

As with the other aims mentioned above, evangelism is among the most noble aims anyone can have—the lifeblood of the religion of Christ. However, Promise Keepers has so denied the significance of doctrinal purity in its overemphasis on unity that its “evangelism” is merely the anti-Scriptural “sinner’s prayer” approach. The leaders are all faith-only, anti-baptism adherents who preach a damning, rather than a saving message in light of the Lord’s plan of salvation revealed in the New Testament. While the major aims of Promise Keepers are admirable, their approach to achieving them is most certainly not. In fact, its approach is anti-Scriptural from start to finish.

The Prime Movers

As previously indicated, Bill McCartney was a, if not **the**, principal originator of the Promise Keepers Movement. His whole life, until beginning Promise Keepers, was consumed with coaching football (very successfully, as a matter of fact). When asked by David Broder, *Washington Post* columnist on “Meet the Press,” about his qualifications for leading an evangelical movement, he admitted he had none. Broder then asked him, “What is the source of your wisdom in the interpretation of the Bible?” McCartney responded: “I depend upon my pastor to help define the Word of God for me. I haven’t been to seminary. I haven’t studied. I’m very much at risk, if you will, and I need to stay under constant monitoring and tutelage.”⁹

Translation: “I don’t have a clue about what the Bible teaches.” But at least he was honest!

It is only fair to ask, “Who and what (religiously) is McCartney’s ‘pastor’?” His name is James Ryle, pastor of the Boulder Valley Vineyard Fellowship and (not surprisingly) a member of the Promise Keepers board of directors. Randy Phillips, the President of Promise Keepers, is also a member of the Boulder Valley group. This church, like several other American and Canadian churches, is aligned with the extremely charismatic Vineyard Fellowship Movement. These people are outspoken advocates of modern-day miraculous signs, wonders, and special revelations from God. The “Laughing Revival” (in which people allegedly become involved in uncontrollable laughter due to being overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit) began in some of the Vineyard churches. Ryle has made numerous bizarre and fantastic claims of God’s revelations to him, especially through various dreams.

According to Ryle, God anointed the Beatles to begin a universal revival in the 1960s but withdrew it in 1970. Now Ryle and his Promise Keepers cohorts are convinced that they will enjoy the same sort of universal cult following the Beatles inspired. Ryle claims to be an inspired prophet and his “revelation” dreams have involved hippos, Olive Oyl and Popeye, pigs and billboards, victory for the Colorado Buffaloes, and other such extremely important subjects. He claims that he once was able to “get inside the Lord” and see things through His eyes.¹⁰ This religious fraud and false prophet—and his ultra-charismatic cohorts—provide direction and warped Scripture interpretation to McCartney and to the Promise Keepers organization.

Organization and Methodology of the Promise Keepers

At the top of the Promise Keepers authority pyramid is the leadership which I briefly discussed above. A board of directors, presided over by Randy Phillips, is the basic governing

and directional authority of the movement. Although I could not find a specific statement to the effect that Bill McCartney is a member of the board, I assume that he is. Both McCartney and Phillips are members of Ryle's radical charismatic Boulder Valley Vineyard Church, which makes for a decidedly strong charismatic flavor for Promise Keepers, even without knowing the makeup of the remainder of the board. The administration of the far-flung and multi-faceted efforts of this group is accomplished by a battalion of several hundred managers and secretaries in the home office.

The aims of this extra-church organization are accomplished by working through and tapping the manpower of existing sectarian churches. By enlisting, training, and using men it attracts from denominational congregations, Promise Keepers infiltrates said churches and pushes its agenda in them. This plan involves the use of the pastor, a key man, and an ambassador in each congregation. Through Clergy Conferences sectarian pastors are recruited and coached by Promise Keepers' personnel to promote its agenda in the congregations of the respective pastors.

The Clergy Conferences are conducted...

...to help reignite clergy with hope and courage in their call so that they will lead their people into revival.... Promise Keepers believe that their clergy are the human agents whom God has established to lead the church.... "As the clergy goes, so goes the Church." It is Promise Keepers greatest desire to bless and honor clergy, to build them up in hope and confidence; to encourage, equip and network so that they will lead their churches in revival and their communities in awakening.¹¹

The cooperating pastors are then sent back to their respective churches with the charge to appoint a "Key Man" and an "Ambassador" from among the men in their respective flocks.

The Key Man is an agent or liaison between Promise Keepers and the church. He is responsible for setting up men's ministries, approved and directed by Promise Keepers, in his church. To train these Key Men, "Men's Ministry Leadership Seminars" are conducted in various areas. In a recent year over 45,000 men attended these seminars.¹² Thus, the Key Man is actually an agent of Promise Keepers with the responsibility of promoting the movement's aims in the congregation.

The efforts of the Ambassador are directed toward those outside his own congregation, both in other churches and in the community at large. He is apparently somewhat of a public

relations agent with the two-fold task of keeping Promise Keepers before the public in a favorable light and enlisting non-participating churches to become involved.

It is evident that Promise Keepers is basically a parasitic religious organization controlled by men who are radically charismatic in their views. It depends on the equally anti-Scriptural system of denominationalism and its clergy-laity distinctions.

Doctrinal Emphases of Promise Keepers

Problems in Their "Statement of Faith"

The "Statement of Faith" of the Promise Keepers organization includes many Scriptural concepts, including belief in the Three-person Godhead and the complete and inerrant verbal inspiration of Scripture. Concerning the Christ, they affirm His virgin birth, Deity, sinless life, miracles, vicarious/sacrificial death on the cross, bodily resurrection, and ascension into Heaven. They confess belief in the Holy Spirit as a person and as a member of the Godhead and that God created man in His own image.¹³ However, their creed also contains some very problematical statements. B.J. Clarke identifies them as follows:

First, they affirm that Jesus is going to return to earth in power and glory.... Second, the..."Statement of Faith" asserts that the Holy Spirit "performs the miracle of new life in an unbeliever and indwells believers, enabling them to live a godly life." ...Third, the..."Statement of Faith" says that man's alienation from God "can be removed only by accepting through faith God's gift of salvation which was made possible by Christ's death."¹⁴

Their affirmation that Christ will return **to earth** evinces their belief in Dispensational Premillennialism, which avers that He will come back to earth (particularly to Jerusalem) and establish a millennial earthly kingdom (as widespread as this theological system is in Protestantism, it would be surprising if they did not believe in it). While the Bible repeatedly teaches that Christ will return (Mat. 24:42-42; John 14:1-3; et al.), it nowhere teaches that He will ever set foot on the earth for one moment, much less for one thousand years. Rather, He will appear **above** the earth and call us up to be with Him:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 The. 4:16-17).¹⁵

We have already noticed the heavy charismatic influence at the highest level of Promise Keepers, so we should not be surprised to see a considerable emphasis on Pentecostal/ charismatic concepts of the Holy Spirit and His work. Their "Statement of

Faith” in this regard is just what we would expect. Obviously, from their own words, Promise Keepers believes that the Holy Spirit operates **directly**, apart from His Word, upon both believers and unbelievers. Yes, He operates upon the unbeliever, but He does so through His Word. The Gospel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is quite sufficient to save the sinner. It is the “...power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). When men hear it, believe it, and consummate their obedience to it in baptism “unto remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), they are thereby redeemed from their sins, unless Christ was a false prophet (Mark 16:15–16). From Scriptural baptism one is raised to “walk in newness of life” with no need for the Holy Spirit to operate in some direct way or perform a “miracle of new life” (Rom. 6:4). Likewise, while the Holy Spirit indeed operates upon the Christian whereby he is enabled to live a godly life, He does not do so **directly**, but through His Word: “And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, **which is able to build you up**, and to give you the inheritance among all them that are sanctified” (Acts 20:32, *emph. DM*). Paul further declared: “Every **scripture** inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be **complete, furnished completely unto every good work**” (2 Tim. 3:16–17, *emph. DM*). Therefore, **even in the first century when the Holy Spirit empowered certain men to work miracles**, He enabled Christians to “live a godly life” only by means of His **Word** – not directly and immediately apart from or in addition to it (I could wish that some of our brethren would learn this truth also).

The third affirmation is a summation of their “plan of salvation,” which states that one can be reconciled to God “only by accepting through faith God’s gift of salvation.” When one Scripturally defines the terms in this statement, especially the clause, *accepting through faith*, then there is no problem with it. However, the Promise Keepers’ definition of *faith* in this clause is *faith alone*, “faith” before and without obedient works. Salvation comes **after** faith **and** baptism, **not** after faith and **before** baptism (Mark 16:16). The New Testament teaches that salvation is by faith or belief (John 3:16; Rom. 1:16; et al.), but **never** by faith alone, apart from Scripturally stipulated “works” of obedience (Rom. 6:17–18; Gal. 5:6; Jas. 2:24; et al.).

Problems in Their Seven Promises

I quoted the list of seven promises at the very beginning of this MSS, and I encourage the reader to turn back there and reread them before proceeding. Admittedly, many, if not most, of the declarations of the seven promises are commendable, **if the terms used in them are**

Scripturally defined and applied. But here we encounter a significant difficulty because the Promise Keepers do not comprehend Scriptural definitions and applications of these terms. Consider some observations concerning the seven promises in order.

Promise one: The Scriptures surely urge us to honor the Lord through worship, prayer, and obedience to His Word. However, as we shall later see, The Promise Keepers organization has no respect for the teaching of the New Testament concerning worship. While giving lip service to the need for obedience, it ignores some of the plainest commands of Scripture, teaching and practicing numerous things for which there is no Scriptural authority.

We could even agree that the worship, prayer, and obedience are to be done “in the power of the Holy Spirit,” if allowed to Scripturally define this clause. However, as already indicated, Promise Keepers is saturated at the top with men who believe in modern-day miracles and continued inspiration/revelation by the Holy Spirit. By “power of the Holy Spirit” they mean direct, immediate, in-addition-to-the-Word (“supra-literary”?) activity. The Holy Spirit most certainly worked in **direct** ways in the apostolic age while the New Testament was still in the process of being revealed to completion. The miracles, signs, and wonders He enables men to perform were for the purpose of confirming the Truth which they spoke (Mark 16:20; John 20:30–31; Heb. 2:3–4). However, all such miraculous signs ceased when He had finished revealing all the Truth (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 13:8–12; Eph. 4:11–16).

Promise two: There is nothing wrong and much that is right about pursuing “vital relationships with a few other men” or even with many other men (Rom. 12:10; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12–14; et al.). As this promise indicates, we need help and encouragement from our brethren (Rom. 14:19; 15:2; 1 The. 5:11). However, we must remember that Promise Keepers considers members of all of the denominations, whether Protestant or Catholic, as “brothers” in their full-bore approach to unity and ecumenism. The New Testament knows of none who are spiritual brethren except those whose spiritual Father is God by virtue of their being “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). The Bible knows of none who enjoy Biblical spiritual fellowship with one another except those who are in spiritual fellowship with God, which is conditioned upon their being born anew (John 3:3–5) and continuing to “walk in the light” (i.e., live according to God’s Word) (1 John 1:6–7). The Promise Keepers’ approach is the old sectarian “agree-to-disagree,” ignore-differences-in-doctrine-and-practice,” “unity-in-diversity” chant that has characterized denominationalism since the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Promise three: The third promise has to do with spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity, all of which the Scriptures demand of the Lord's people. Again, all of these must be defined by the Scriptures themselves. Likely there would be little or no controversy with Promise Keepers' concepts of moral, ethical, and sexual behavior, unless it be on the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage (see below for discussion of this point). However, their generally loose approach to God's Word on various subjects leaves what they mean by "spiritual purity" very much in doubt. This quality can only be found where men have absolute respect for the authority God's Word: "If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). "Spiritual purity" involves heeding the Lord's Word concerning such things as the plan of salvation, the nature of the church/kingdom, authorized and acceptable worship, the limits of fellowship and unity, the work of the Holy Spirit, and so forth. It is obvious that Promise Keepers either does not understand or does not respect the meaning of "spiritual purity."

Promise four: Every Christian applauds the application of Biblical values to the home, a practice so woefully absent in our current culture. Husbands and fathers should be encouraged to so love and protect their own as to build strong marriages and families (Eph. 5:22-6:4; et al.).

My question concerning this promise relates especially to the teachings of Promise Keepers concerning divorce and remarriage. We have no literature from which to document their convictions, but given their generally super-tolerant views on doctrine, fellowship, and the authority of the Scriptures, I would be greatly surprised if they do not take the same approach to divorce and remarriage. Generally, the denominations (and, sad to say, many brethren) either totally ignore or pervert the teaching of the Lord on this subject:

He saith unto them, Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it hath not been so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery (Mat. 19:8-9).

Such folk fully ally themselves with the ungodly Pharisees who believed it was "...lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause" (v. 3). If Promise Keepers thus believe and teach (which I strongly suspect they do), then they are certainly not teaching "Biblical values" concerning the home. Rather, they are encouraging men who are in adulterous marriages to continue to live in them. The Bible still teaches that impenitent adulterers will be lost eternally (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Heb. 13:4; et al.).

Promise five: Commitment to one's local congregation and encouragement of one's preacher is the subject of this promise. These activities are rooted in Scriptural principles and anyone who has faithfully preached for long has urged these upon his listeners from time to time (especially the part about encouraging the preacher!). The New Testament knows nothing of Christians who are merely "members-at-large." Either explicitly or implicitly, the New Testament identifies every member of the church with a local congregation (Acts 8:1-3; 9:26-29; Phi. 1:1; et al.). Local congregations are the basic "operational units" of the Lord's church and they must have loyal service and support from their members to function effectively. Gospel preachers certainly need and deserve the prayers of their brethren (Paul repeatedly asked brethren to pray for him [1 The. 5:25; 2 The. 3:1]). Those who are faithful in life and doctrine (including preachers) deserve honor and respect (Rom. 12:10; 13:7; 2 Tim. 2:21).

But one must consider what Promise Keepers means by urging church and preacher loyalty. By exhorting men to support their respective churches, they refer to their various denominations. It matters not that some churches practice sprinkling and others immersion, that some ordain women preachers and others refuse such, that some believe in present-day miraculous gifts and others staunchly deny them, that some believe in praying only to God and others pray to Mary and the "saints," and so forth. The Promise Keepers' dictum is "Support the mission of your church, regardless of what it teaches or practices." This is radically contrary to New Testament doctrine:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent (Rom. 16:17-18).

These words apply to the way God's faithful people are to treat one, ten, two hundred, or one thousand (thus congregations) who behave as described.

By urging men to honor and pray for their "pastors" they further demonstrate their disdain for the doctrine of Christ. The respective pastors of the religious conglomeration attracted to Promise Keepers run the same gamut of widely disparate doctrines and practices as do their various denominational congregations. Thus, the fifth promise makes men commit themselves to support their pastors, regardless of the false doctrines they teach. Beyond this is the obvious erroneous use of the word *pastor*.

While *pastor* is a Scriptural term (Eph. 4:11), denominationalists (including Promise Keepers) universally use it in a way that is anti-Scriptural. The denominations consistently use

pastor interchangeably with *preacher*, but the New Testament never so uses it. Rather, Scripture uses *pastor* only in reference to men who are otherwise called “bishops” and “elders,” which terms (along with “overseers”) are also used interchangeably with each other (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5–7; 1 Pet. 5:1–2).¹⁶ Elders, bishops, and pastors are the same men in the New Testament. Moreover, the New Testament knows nothing of one-pastor, one-elder, or one-bishop rule in a congregation. In contrast, the Scriptural pattern requires a plurality of such men in each congregation (Acts 11:30, 14:23; 15:2–6; 20:17; Tit. 1:5).

Promise six: The theme of the sixth promise is unity among men, a subject in which every faithful saint must be interested. Paul commands us to give “...diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Promise six aims at demonstrating “the power of Biblical unity,” a commendable aim without argument. However, this aim in the hands of Promise Keepers has no possibility of success, either practically or Biblically. In fact, promise number six is seriously flawed in that it seeks to tear down “racial and denominational barriers,” as if these two issues were in the same class. They most definitely are not. One’s race has nothing to do with his relationship to God:

And Peter opened his mouth and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34–35).

Men who would imitate God will not show respect of persons based on race or any other superficial basis (Jam. 2:9). Christians should work in every honorable way for unity and harmony between those of different races.

One’s affiliation with a denomination, however, most definitely has something to do with one’s relationship to God. One cannot be in any denomination and be pleasing to God. The denominations are all “plants” which God has not planted and which He will, sooner or later, uproot (Mat. 15:13). They are all blindly following blind guides (their pastors and creeds), and the fate of both is the pit of eternal doom (v. 14). Promise Keepers is wasting its time trying to get men to overcome denominational barriers. Even if they should succeed (which they will not), the result will be no more pleasing to God than the previous circumstance. Whether or not men overcome their denominational barriers, they still remain separated from God in denominationalism. If those in the denominations would simply obey the Gospel and serve God faithfully it would take care of the problem of “denominational barriers.” These barriers would immediately disappear because the denominations themselves would no longer exist.

The New Testament knows nothing of them and obeying the New Testament will never produce or sanction them.

The aim of unity seems at times to have become the great priority of Promise Keepers. The extent to which they are pushing this theme is seen in the following statement from Bill McCartney: “Almighty God wants to bring Christian men together regardless of their...denominational background or style of worship. There’s only one criterion for this kind of unity: to love Jesus and be born of the Spirit of God.”¹⁷ If McCartney had a modicum of knowledge of Scripture (which I note earlier that he admits to not having), He would know that “love of Jesus” can only be measured by obedience to Him (John 14:15). Of course, McCartney and his cohorts define what it means to be “born of the Spirit of God” in terms of holy-rollerism, which is their religious context and loyalty. It is obvious from reading their literature that to them, anyone who has said the “sinner’s prayer” and can testify to an immediate warm sensation in his upper torso has been “born of the Spirit of God.”

Ironically and sadly, some of the clearest and strongest Promise Keepers’ statements calling for interdenominational unity have come from Max Lucado, a brother who has made a career of heresy. He is somewhat of a “darling” of Promise Keepers, having been tapped to speak on more than one Promise Keepers’ rally, including the one in Washington. His major theme in our nation’s capital was “unity,” regardless of denominational affiliation or doctrinal difference. On behalf of the half-million men he addressed, he confessed, “We have focused on controversies that divide us rather than focus on the cross that unites us.” He further stated: “We will confess that we have not obeyed these words: ‘Accept one another then just as Christ has accepted you.’”¹⁸

The sixth promise is self-contradictory: It urges commitment to overcoming “denominational barriers” as a demonstration of “the power of Biblical unity.” However, **Biblical** unity has nothing in common with **denominational** unity. Denominational “unity” is no unity at all. It allows everyone to remain divided by name, creed, and practice while pretending that these gargantuan differences either do not exist or do not matter. Denominational “unity” therefore ignores the importance of Biblical doctrine. Contrariwise, Biblical unity is rooted in obligatory New Testament doctrine and practice and cannot exist apart from agreement on these essential twins. It was concerning such obligatory matters that Paul wrote:

Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10; cf. Eph. 4:1–6).

He commanded the Philippians to be one on the basis of the Gospel: “Stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel” (Phi. 1:27; cf. 3:16). Denominational “unity” is always at the expense of Divine Truth, while Biblical unity has Truth as its foundation.

Promise seven: I have already given some attention to this promise, so I will make only a few additional observations here. The seventh promise has to do with influencing the world through obedience to “the great commandment” (Mark 12:30–31) and “the great commission” (Mat. 28:19–20). This is perhaps the “cleanest” of all of the seven promises. It must be the aim of every Christian to love God supremely and to make disciples of all the nations. However, again, we must inquire whether or not Promise Keepers comprehends the meaning of either of these. Love of God and Christ can be measured only by obedience. John wrote, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous (1 John 5:3). Jesus said, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments” (John 14:15; cf. vv. 21, 23– 24). However, Promise Keepers ignores the authority of the Lord through His Word time after time, as I have already demonstrated.

Additionally, Promise Keepers does not believe in the message of the great commission, which teaches that one must believe the Gospel (which includes believe in the Sonship of the Christ) and be baptized in order to be saved (Mark 16:16). It does more harm than good to take a message to the world that will not save the souls of men, all the while proclaiming that it will. The motivation is correct, but the message of Promise Keepers is not.

Problems in Their Worship

While Promise Keepers is not a church, it is a religious organization that conducts worship activities at its rallies and conferences. One of the rallies was characterized by the following: “The so-called worship is led by **Maranatha! Men’s Praise Band**, with special music by Larness Harris, Scott Wesley Brown (who plays the guitar) and various musicians, including Dennis Agajanian, **Phillips, Craig & Dean**, Davie Irish, and Aaron Jeoffrey.”¹⁹ An attendant at a Promise Keepers rally summarized the worship activities as follows:

They used a piano and keyboard and guitars and sax and flute and drums and bongos and I’m not sure what else. And I sang and made melody to the Lord with all my heart and to the bottom of my lungs.²⁰

Edwin Louis Cole, one of the Promise Keepers' writers and speakers, described one of the rallies thus:

The men in the outdoor stadium numbered 22,000. They cheered, clapped, shouted, and slapped each other on the back with wild enthusiasm. They laughed, cried, and even sang together like no sports, military, or political crowd I'd ever seen. This was not a riot, a sporting event, or review of some country's fighting men. It was a celebration of their manhood under the lordship of Jesus Christ.²¹

Another participant gave the following account of activities that took place at the rally he attended:

The mood is festive as large beach balls are punched with vigor, sending them on a never-ending course throughout the crowd. A styrofoam glider wafts its way from the upper regions, accompanied by oohs and ahhs. A small group of men on one side of the stadium begins to chant: "We love Jesus, yes we do! We love Jesus; how 'bout you?" The shout grows louder as more voices join in. Soon the other side of the stadium picks up the challenge. No one wins; it's a tie as to which side shouts loudest.²²

These activities all smack of the hyper-emotional, entertainment, "show-biz" approach common to probably most of Christendom nowadays.

Anyone who has the least respect for the simplicity and dignity of worship of the true and living God and of His Son as portrayed and authorized in the New Testament is repulsed by such antics in the name of the religion of Christ. All such at least borders on blasphemy. Service that is well-pleasing to God must be offered "with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28). Has Promise Keepers organizers never read Paul's injunction: "But let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40)?

Per Bill McCartney's previously quoted statement, Promise Keepers is not concerned about varying "styles of worship." Unfortunately for him and his associates, **God is concerned**. Has McCartney never heard of Cain (Heb. 11:4), Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 2:1-10), or Jeroboam (1 Kin. 14:7-10)? Has he never read how strict God was concerning worship under the law of Moses? Does he think God has no concern about worship under the New Testament?

According to the Christ, acceptable worship to God **must** be "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). The religious frenzy into which the Promise Keepers rallies whip their participants is hardly in keeping with the genuine attitude of worship demanded by worshiping God "in spirit." It is nothing but unrestrained raw emotion. Further, it is certain that such a raucous crowd hysteria and entertainment atmosphere does not constitute worship "in Truth," that is, according to the teaching of the Truth of God's Word (John 17:17). Besides violating the general

principles mentioned above (and many others which could be cited), Promise Keepers specifically disregards the New Testament concerning music in worship. The only music in worship that the New Testament authorizes is that which is produced by the God-given human voice which teaches and admonishes other worshipers as it praises God, in company with the rest of the congregation (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Promise Keepers comes under the identical condemnation the Lord leveled against the Pharisees and scribes of His day:

Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Mat. 15:7-9).

These doctrinal concerns do not exhaust the list by any means, but any one of them is sufficient to reveal the fact that Promise Keepers is built on the ever-shifting sands of human emotion, doctrine, opinion, and tradition, rather than upon the immutable Word of God.

Should We Participate in the Promise Keepers' Movement?

It is too late to ask this question concerning some brethren, because they are already involved — some up to their liberal, itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Some are not only participating themselves but are also enthusiastically encouraging others to do so. When a Promise Keepers' rally was conducted in Denton, Texas, a few years ago, the Singing Oaks Church of Christ had at least one man who served as a Promise Keepers' agent. It is not unusual to read church bulletins published by our brethren announcing Promise Keepers' rallies and encouraging men to attend. At least one congregation that still identifies itself as a "Church of Christ" has hosted a Promise Keepers' gathering.

I earlier noted that Max Lucado, the ultra-liberal preacher at the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, has been a speaker at Promise Keepers' rallies. He has long been making pronouncements that demonstrate his completely denominational concept of the church, so he fits right in with the ecumenism of the Promise Keepers agenda. His remarks at the Washington rally are revolting to one who values the Gospel Truth, indicating clearly that he believes the church is composed of all of the denominations and that there is no such thing as false doctrine.²³

Rubel Shelly, always ready to applaud any heretical idea and to embrace every denominational cause, has jumped on the Promise Keepers' bandwagon in a big way. He gave the following gushing report of the Washington rally in *Lovelines*, the weekly bulletin of the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee:

The final count tells us that a number approaching 100 of our members made it to Washington for the Stand in the Gap rally last weekend. What a sight! Men were spread across an area in front of the capitol building all the way to the Lincoln Memorial. Hundreds of thousands were there to pledge their love for and obedience to Christ. They repented. They prayed. They promised to affirm their families and to work for racial reconciliation. They pleaded for God to tear down the walls we have erected in the body of Christ.²⁴

Brother Shelly went much further in a subsequent *Wineskins* editorial, published soon after the Washington rally. In a full two-page spread, which included a picture of Bill McCartney and a listing of "The Seven Promises," he gave a full-bore endorsement to Promise Keepers. He confessed perplexity that "several Church of Christ preachers" would dare oppose the phenomenon. After making several pitiful excuses for the multitude of errors connected with and promoted by Promise Keepers, brother Shelly explained how he was able to praise the movement and other sectarian efforts so highly:

Because I have only Jesus to serve and not a sectarian agenda to pursue, I can affirm the exalting of my Lord at a Promise Keepers gathering, Franklin Graham crusade, or Christian music concert.... I can live my own distinctive convictions, share anything I believe to be from Christ with others, and be open to receiving new insights the Holy Spirit may offer through another follower of Christ.²⁵

We should not miss the irony of his words: He is able to join the sectarians in all of their unholy doctrines and practices **because he is not sectarian!** He concluded by saying, "I praise God for it [Promise Keepers] and encourage you to experience it in your life." The same issue carried another full-page testimonial for the Washington rally by Ron Rose, who related that he was one in a group of thirty-five men from Fort Worth, Texas, who attended.²⁶

But **should** those who are members of the church of the Lord participate in Promise Keepers is the question before us. One way by which one may arrive at a fair answer is to notice from whom among us the endorsements are coming. I am naturally suspicious of anything that has such glowing commendation and willing participation from the likes of Max Lucado and Rubel Shelly. In their pronouncements and behaviors, they announced years ago their disgust for the church for which Christ died. They just do not have enough honor and integrity to go ahead and definitively announce their departure from that blessed body which they have so frequently and egregiously shamed. For the faithful, if these men endorse anyone or anything it amounts to a kiss of death.

The decision of the Christian's participation in any activity must be based upon whether or not it is in harmony with the Will of God. Perhaps a few *if-then* statements will be helpful:

1. **If** the concept that the church is composed of all of the denominations is correct, **then** one should support Promise Keepers.
2. **If** the use of mechanical instrumental music in worship is Scripturally authorized, **then** one should participate in Promise Keepers.
3. **If** the “sinner’s prayer plan of salvation” is as good as the Gospel plan of salvation, **then** one should endorse Promise Keepers.
4. **If** men are still being empowered to perform miracles as demonstrated in the Bible, **then** one should praise Promise Keepers.
5. **If** it is true that the Holy Spirit provides direct strength and guidance – apart from His Word – to men today, **then** one should defend Promise Keepers.
6. **If** men should be urged to support their differing and doctrinally corrupt “pastors,” **then** one should encourage Promise Keepers.
7. **If** Biblical unity consists of merely ignoring denominational barriers and differences, **then** one should join Promise Keepers.

This list could be extended much further, but I believe it is not necessary to do so. Sufficient documentation has been provided to alert anyone who seeks to be faithful to the Word of God to the multitude of errors related to and propagated by Promise Keepers. Such evidence abounds, but if that which has been provided in this chapter will not convince the reader, it is likely he will not be convinced

Conclusion

The answer to the question with which we began is a resounding, unequivocal, “No, the faithful child of God should not participate in Promise Keepers.” In fact, he cannot do so and remain faithful to the Son of God.

In light of the teachings and practices of Promise Keepers which have been documented, perhaps just a few key statements from the Lord and His apostles will help put the question of the Christian’s participation in perspective:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:21-23).

And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men (Matt. 15:6-9).

I marvel that ye are so quickly removing from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto a different gospel; which is not another gospel only there are some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, if any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema (Gal. 1:6-9).

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them (Eph. 5:11).

And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).

Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works (2 Jn. 9-11).

Endnotes

1. As quoted from B.J. Clarke, *A Closer Look at Promise Keepers* (Southaven, MS: Southaven Church of Christ, 1978), pp. 26-27.
2. *Promise Keepers: Men of Integrity*, brochure published by Promise Keepers, p. 12.
3. *Denton Record-Chronicle*, 10 April, 1998, p. 6A.
4. Ibid.
5. Clarke, p. 12.
6. Ibid.
7. Fan into Flame Clergy Conference (1996) brochure (Promise Keepers, 1996), p. 4.
8. Buster Dobbs, "Potpourri," *Firm Foundation* (September 1995): 28.
9. Clarke, p. 14.
10. Clarke, pp. 14-19.
11. Fan into Flame Clergy Conference (1996) internet update (August 28, 1995).
12. Dan Flourney, *Beware of "Promise Keepers"* (Irving, TX: Dan Flourney, 1997), p. 3.
13. As documented by Clarke, p. 25.
14. Clarke, pp. 25-26.
15. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
16. The Greek noun translated "pastor" is *poimen*, referring to a shepherd who tends a flock. It appears several times in the Greek New Testament in its literal sense (e.g., Mat. 9:36; 25:32; Mark 6:34; et al.). It is also used several times metaphorically of the Christ (e.g., Mat. 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 10:11, 14, 16; et al.). It is used only once metaphorically of a class of men in the church (Eph. 4:11). The verb form of *poimen* (*poimaino*) refers to one who acts as a shepherd or does the work of tending sheep, thus he "pastors" sheep. *Poimaino* appears in two passages in reference to the work the Holy Spirit charges certain men to do ("feed the flock" [Acts 20:28]; "tend the flock" [1 Pet. 5:2]). In both passages the pastoring is to be done by elders or bishops

(Acts 20:17, 28–29; 1 Pet. 5:1–3), rather than preachers or evangelists. The denominational “pastor” system is merely a revision of the Roman Catholic parish priest system, neither of which exist with a shred of Scriptural authority.

17. Bill McCartney, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, pp. 161–62.
18. From transcript of Lucado speech, C-SPAN broadcast.
19. Flournoy, p. 7.
20. Dobbs, *ibid*.
21. Edwin Louis Cole, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994), p. 23, as quoted in Flournoy, p. 8.
22. *Promise Keepers: A Powerful Ecumenical Thrust that Promotes Romanism!* (San Diego, CA: Mission to Catholics International, n.d.), p. 1, as quoted in Flournoy, p. 7. (The yelling contest is reminiscent of some of the behavior encouraged in children during vacation Bible schools.)
23. For several excerpts from his speech see Clarke, pp. 35–38, but faithful saints should be prepared to become ill.
24. As quoted by Clarke, p. 8.
25. Rubel Shelly, “Encouraging Men To Be **Godly** Men,” *Wineskins* 3 (November–December 1997): 4–5.
26. Ron Rose, “I Was There—Standing in the Gap”: 11.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the First Annual Lubbock Lectures, hosted by the Southside Church of Christ, Lubbock TX, October 11–15, 1998. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Faith Once for all Delivered*, ed. Tommy J. Hicks (Lubbock, TX: Hicks Pub., 1998).]

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