

## THE PROMISE KEEPERS

The Promise Keepers movement, founded in 1991 by former Colorado University football coach Bill McCartney, has made a big impact in North American evangelical and reformed circles. Many think that the movement is God's answer to Christian men's need. Glowing testimonies tell of how PK men are now more committed to their families and churches.

Although Bill McCartney is the founder of PK, the president is Randy Philipps, who has a large staff to handle the thousands of daily phone calls and the large volume of mail. PK has been endorsed by, among others, Campus Crusade's Bill Bright and Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family. Dobson promotes PK on his radio broadcasts.

This new all men's movement experienced phenomenal growth. The first rally in Boulder, Colorado, drew 4,200 men. In 1995, 720,000 men attended 13 rallies, and PK groups were formed across the continent. In Canada, PK was established officially in the same year and received charitable status from Revenue Canada. Men are being encouraged by their wives and friends to get involved. Diane Roblin Lee and a small group of women in Port Perry, Ontario, formed a PR support group, "Promise Partners International (PPI)". In an open letter to PK they wrote:

As women, we believe that deep in the hearts of the great majority of our sisters is either longing or thanksgiving for a godly mate of Christ like masculinity.... Therefore, we thank God for the emergence and rapid growth of Promise Keepers. You are God's answer to the longings deep in the hearts of millions of women and children all over the earth.

PK calls for the reins of leadership in church and home to be returned to men. The participants at the rallies vow to be better leaders in home, church, and workplace by pledging to uphold seven specific promises. PK challenges men to live with integrity and according to Biblical values, to keep their promises, to honour their commitment to God, their families and other men, to repent of their work-aholicism and addiction to sports, and to renounce pornography. Men must win back their families and their cultures by rising above circumstances through the grace and power of God. Dr. Tony Evans, a featured PK speaker and chaplain of Dallas Mavericks basketball team, charged men:

Take your role back – not by acting tough or strutting around claiming, "I'm the man around here," but by being the man God wants you to be. Do that, and your wife and children will follow your leadership gladly.

Why does PK receive such an enthusiastic reception? The movement indicates that many men are searching for their identity as male. It provides answers for them in a time of rapid cultural change, great confusion, and moral relativism. Many men have lost their sense of purpose and significance. Yet they do want to take responsibility for their families, and be good husbands and caring fathers. In our modern society, the role of

father is short changed. In television comedies the father is often perceived as a buffoon. Fatherhood, as a social role for men, has been diminished. What has happened to fathers in our society? One man said: "He has split from his role. Most fathers are gone." Another said: "They are disappearing. He is under siege right now." In his book *Fatherless American, Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, David Blankenhorn points to the devastating consequences of fatherlessness.

As fatherlessness spreads in our society, so does our acceptance and even endorsement of the trend. For as our society abandons the fatherhood idea, we do not simply become "more aware" of children growing up without fathers. We also become "accepting of that." In a culture of fatherlessness, fatherhood becomes irrelevant.

I see the PK movement as a Christian reaction to the modern diminishing of fatherhood and the impact of feminism. Feminism has pervaded society. It has had a negative effect on family relationships. It has changed the workplace and gender roles. Dr. Tony Evans claims that the present "national crisis" in the United States is a direct result of the "feminization of the American male." Mary Kassian, an executive member of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, remarked:

Our generation has grown up in a vacuum of what it means to be a man or a woman ...I really don't think the feminist movement in general has had a positive impact on men.

She is right. Feminism has left man with the message that women are victims of male lust for power. Extreme feminist ideology is out to destroy the marriage bond, promote pro-choice abortion and safe sex. It indulges in male bashing as the only acceptable form of discrimination. It doesn't believe it strange that women should meet in gender exclusive forums such as the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. But the same feminists oppose an all male bonding PK movement and its rallies.

Feminism also had a negative impact on the church. Even many churches that stress male leadership have ministries that are more geared toward women than men. Many men have turned their back on the church because they see it as something mainly for women and children. Dr. Evans notes that the pulpit may be filled by a man, but the rest of the church program is largely run by women. This gives boys a feminized picture of what it means to be male. He comments that this leads to what he calls "sissified" men who have relinquished their leadership in the home, at church, and at school. And he adds:

Now don't misunderstand. I am grateful for every godly and gifted women God is using in the home, at church, and at school. We'd be in even worse shape than we are without these talented and committed women.

A feminized society and church did create the conditions for the rise and rapid growth of PK. The movement urges men to take their rightful place as leaders.

The PK movement also points to the failure of the church of Christ to act as a communion of saints. PK teaches that every man must have an older man to whom he is held accountable. This concept of mentoring is based on passages such "Love one another" (John 13:34); "Encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:24,25).

This loving and encouraging one another, and to be accountable does not seem to function too well in many churches. But if the church would teach and practice the communion of saints, men would have a body of believers where there would be mutual submission, and a place to deal with their sin and shortcomings. The historic Heidelberg Catechism is still applicable for the modern church. To live as a communion of saints means that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts... that each member should consider it his duty to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, q.a. 55).

As the PK movement has been hailed as a boost for men and their churches and is doing many good things, it is difficult to offer a critique. But I do have some reservations and questions.

First, as a para-church movement, PK functions independently alongside the church. It offers a "discipling" environment, which many pastors and elders of local churches are either unwilling or unable to provide. Scripture ought to be mined to discover anew what it teaches about the church, its life and mission.

The church is the God-ordained means for spiritual growth, development, discipline, and pastoral care. The Church consists of male and female believers. The Bible does not authorize either male or female movements for the upbuilding of the saints. As an independent organization the PK shares the major weakness of para-churches – the lack of accountability. God has provided the local churches with overseers responsible for the well being of the church (Acts 20).

PK is too ecumenical. It calls for a commitment to reach "beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity." Doctrine doesn't seem to matter as long as you are one in Christ. PK is largely non-committal in affirming the basics of the Christian faith. Even Mormon leaders are now urging their members to participate in PK. Is it because PK preaches a non-doctrinal gospel? This is a cause for concern. Doctrine does matter. Faith has substance. Theological issues shouldn't be shoved aside. As the evangelical theologian David Wells declared, "biblical faith is about truth."

The PK movement is a challenge to the church to teach sound doctrine; to explain that the order of creation established a divine chain of authority and have men take up their leadership role in the church. The church should endeavour to exercise scriptural discipline, and be a caring communion of saints and pray for a new reformation.

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