

FROM THE TRENCHES: PROMISE KEEPERS AS AN EXAMPLE OF CATEGORY-SPECIFIC DISCIPLESHIP

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The Bible study is over, and it's time to share prayer concerns. The women's discipleship group is made up of dedicated, newly-growing believers. There are years of pain behind the attentive eyes. Anne's husband works all the time, and refuses to spend time alone with their daughter because he "can't handle her." Barb's husband's drinking and verbal abuse has gotten worse. Cara's daughters are both in relationships with men who have "slept around" on them. One daughter has made a commitment to Christ. "Where are the Christian young men?" Cara asks. Anita's husband has no interest in church, and now her son, age twelve, is refusing to go on Sundays. The Bible study leader has been hoping these women would begin to reach out to the unchurched, to pray for their communities, to catch a vision for missions or compassion ministry. After three years of regular discipleship, the prayer requests are the same. The pain at home is just too great.

As an evangelical clergyman who seeks to pastor these women and their families, I feel I have some insights about Promise Keepers that might broaden our perspective. Call it "a view from the trenches." My evaluation is based on the "seven promises," one year of reading *New Man* magazine, Promise Keepers' promotional video, reports of the 1996 Pittsburgh conference, and my own experience in working with local Promise Keepers representatives.

I am not endorsing the views expressed in every book written for Promise Keepers, or those of every speaker. Undoubtedly, Promise Keepers is no different from other Christian organizations, with their share of wounded or strident people who interpret the movement according to their personal "axes to grind." But I do believe that Promise Keepers is a move of God, and, like any other move of God, it features "redeemed-but-still-struggling-with-sin" people.

While my own experience with Promise Keepers has been overwhelmingly positive, one young man in a neighboring community alienated many women and men from Promise Keepers by his strident overbearing personality. He was personally threatened by women in leadership, and his pastor, who happened to be female, was totally against Promise Keepers. "Have you ever read the seven promises?" I asked. "No, and I don't care what they are," she answered. I read them to her, and

she was surprised by the one about supporting your pastor, and agreed that they sounded like good basic discipleship. However, she was so wounded by this man's demeanor and *interpretation* of what Promise Keepers was about, that she wrote the whole thing off. (To the organization's credit, he was not allowed to hold any positions within the organization and was "strongly encouraged" to become part of an accountability group with some older men.)

However, if Promise Keepers is a part of God's strategy to unite his Body across racial and denominational differences and to bring his revival to our nation, then some challenging questions are: How can we as biblical feminists join with God through our view of Promise Keepers, our intercession on their behalf, and what we speak and/or write about it? Also, is there a corrective and balancing function that those of us in CBE can provide for this movement?

Paul's *magna carta* of Christianity states that "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal 3:28), and with the church through the ages we can affirm the inclusivity of Christ and the egalitarian call to discipleship that transcends categories. Nevertheless, because we live out our earthly lives in various categories such as age, ethnicity, gender, and marital status, many believers find it helpful to link up with others in their category to explore how (from within that category) they might best "spur one another on to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:26). Furthermore, as we seek to obey the Great Commission entrusted to all Christians (Matt 28:19-20), I believe we have tremendous flexibility with regard to style, focus, and "packaging." In recent decades many parachurch organizations have flourished which focus on a specific category. Examples of such category-specific ministries are Young Life, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and Mothers of Preschoolers. Of course, such organizations need constantly to be alert to the danger of emphasizing the category to the detriment of discipleship.

From my point of view, Promise Keepers is a parachurch group gearing its obedience to the Great Commission to those in a specific category (primarily married men). And unlike some other popular parachurch groups, Promise Keepers emphasizes commitment to one's local church and does not look down on mainline denominations—which I, as a PCUSA pastor, of course see as a plus.

So rather than viewing Promise Keepers as a threat or as an exclusivist group, I see them as a basic Christian group seeking to use "male packaging" to disciple men. Years ago, I didn't feel excluded when my high school friends went off to a Young Life conference without me, or when my college neighbor packed for Urbana. At present, I am in a

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clergywomen's covenant group where we clergywomen encourage one another in our ministries, marriages, and as moms. My husband (also clergy) encourages me to go, and he certainly doesn't feel excluded! So in the same spirit, I now rejoice when my parishioners show interest in Promise Keepers.

With shifting social and economic trends, many men are trying to grapple with what it means to be a man, a husband, and a father in the 90s. (See my husband's article on page 21). This crisis is reflected in men's absence from many churches, as men who have failed to find community in the church have sought fellowship through sports or in bars. Others withdraw into the solace of watching TV. Men have frequently gravitated toward the four A's of Apathy, Adultery, Alcoholism or Abuse, to overwork, or to other sinful and damaging alternatives. Many of our churches have mostly female membership, leading some men to conclude that faith is for "wimps." Promise Keepers is successfully reaching many of these men, and PK should be applauded and supported by the rest of us in the wider church, even if the organization's style might not appeal to us personally.

At the church I served previously, we began to see God move among the women. But overwhelmingly, their pastoral issues and prayer concerns involved men—husbands, brothers, sons, and boyfriends—who were in bondage to those "four A's." There were very few good marriages, and in many cases the men were holding these women back from growing spiritually. The men's personal lives were lived in so much pain and struggle that it was difficult for them to reach the point of giving or reaching out themselves. (As I spoke with other pastors, this condition seemed to be endemic to the region.)

I began to cry out to God to please touch the men, as I still do. When I heard Promise Keepers was beginning in our area, I arranged to meet with the two representatives in my office. Both men and I developed a close bond in the Spirit. We anguished and prayed over the devastation the Enemy had wrought among the men and their marriages. We scheduled a Promise Keepers presentation for Father's Day. The women's group started praying. We rented a big screen TV where the Promise Keepers promotional video was shown. The two Promise Keepers men, one in his 60s and one in his early 40s, shared about their own faith and how God had strengthened them through Promise Keepers. Everyone listened intently, because these men's lives were well known among all my parishioners as lives of integrity. That day, Christ's body in our area was further unified. Relationships were built. The presentation gave the women hope. They now know there is a group out there (besides church) which could help reach their husbands, sons and boyfriends. The presentation gave them hope that God is in the business of touching men's lives in real and dramatic ways. A small men's group started and continues weekly. And through it all, never did I personally pick up a hint of patriarchy from the Promise Keepers men. They treated me with total respect and equality.

My husband has attended Promise Keepers with my two closest male friends and parishioners—one from my former congregation and one from my current congregation. We

joked that it was the "ones who didn't really need it" who went. But these men, both in their 30s, both elders, and both growing Christians, were challenged, encouraged and ministered to—a refreshing break from always doing the giving, leading and ministering. They were particularly challenged by the message of racial reconciliation. At the Pittsburgh conference, they were told to seek out someone of color and pray with them. One man in particular was touched, and had tears in his eyes as he told of how the Lord had changed his heart about his own subtle complicity in racism. Another man was also challenged and moved by the racial reconciliation challenge, and is now part of a cross-denominational prayer group in a small Southern community where there is great unspoken racial division. So my conclusion is that even growing evangelical Christian men with good marriages can benefit from Promise Keepers—encouragement and "positive peer pressure" help all of us to "walk the walk."

Finally, although I can affirm that Promise Keepers is a move of God, and the particular expressions of the ministry that I have mentioned have advocated mutual love and concern between spouses rather than rigid roles or hierarchical teaching, I am aware that many men involved (as well as many of the books) advocate the "husband as the head of the house." But my conclusion is that the movement as a whole does not push this. For many men with little church background or only nominal church attendance the terms "spiritual leader" or "head of the house" may just mean a challenge to be *present*—to go to church, to help get the kids ready for church, to take a little responsibility, to repent of destructive or apathetic behavior. There are many Christian married women suffering in silence, longing for their husbands to share their enthusiasm for Christ, who would be thrilled if their husbands initiated anything of a spiritual nature. Many of us reading this article are in Christian marriages with someone we consider a spiritual equal or peer; we may both "initiate" spiritual matters. But many women whose husbands are emotionally absent, consumed with work, sports, and male-only socializing, would welcome their husbands taking Promise Keepers' message to heart: "Love your wife, sacrifice for her, open up to her, and we'll even give you examples, models, stories to show you how."

We are part of the wider Body of Christ, a Body that has different members. Let's remember the woman in Middle America, married to a man who has no idea how to be a loving husband or father. Let's remember the woman whose prayer request is for her daughter whose drunken boyfriend beat her. Let's remember the 55-year-old woman who asks for prayer that her husband will show up at church on Easter—just this once—instead of watching ESPN. Let's remember the young white male evangelicals with good marriages who have never been challenged to repent of racism. Maybe Promise Keepers can be a tool Christ will use to help some of these folks find transformation in him. Although we in CBE may be in a different part of the Body, I urge us to be in dialogue and to build bridges of unity with our Promise Keeper brothers.