

works part-time, told the *Toronto Star* that her husband has become more sensitive as a result of his involvement in the Promise Keepers. "He looks after me. I feel like porcelain. It's a nice feeling not being totally responsible for myself," she said.

As was done at the Million Man March, the men who attend Promise Keepers rallies pray, listen to preachers, and promise to be better men. And not surprisingly, in 1997, the Promise Keepers plan to have a million-man march of their own, also to be held in Washington, D.C.

Today more than ever, Farrakhan has firmly and successfully—and perhaps permanently—in the minds of millions of blacks, equated a reluctance to criticize him and the Nation of Islam (NOI) with loyalty to black people. Indeed, many blacks were critical of Colin Powell for acknowledging Farrakhan's bigotry. Farrakhan, in the minds of many, is the standard by which courageous black manhood is measured. His boldness tends to make his followers very tolerant of his many irrational statements. Even many of his sharpest black critics who point out his weaknesses to predominantly white audiences wouldn't dare do the same before predominantly black audiences out of fear of censure. On the contrary, some of these same critics even applaud Farrakhan's virtues in such circumstances.

Farrakhan might not have exaggerated when he boasted, "I am to black people what the Pope is to white people." Indeed, some blacks believe that Farrakhan—in his own words—is their "last chance" to attain freedom, justice, and equality.

It must be acknowledged that many whites make it difficult for some blacks to take the moral high ground on this issue by patronizingly demanding that mainstream black leaders "repudiate Farrakhan." And it is true that some of Farrakhan's critics are correctly identified as sellouts for only attacking him to gain favor with whites, or to advance their own careers.

But even most Afrocentrists and black militants outside the NOI seem unwilling to criticize Farrakhan for the following reasons:

1. They agree with most of what he says and represents.
2. They do not accept many of his irrational beliefs or hateful statements, but

they are not particularly bothered by them.

3. They secretly agree with most of what he says and represents, but are unable or unwilling to say so.

4. They disagree with much of what he stands for, but they do not want to threaten the widespread operational unity among black individuals and organizations that has taken so long to come to fruition.

If the NOI had been a secular organization rather than a bizarre and authoritarian religious sect, it is probable that its membership would have been larger than that of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) under Marcus Garvey during his heyday in the 1920s. (The UNIA was one of the largest black activist organizations of all time.) But that point may be irrelevant. NOI's influence will continue to grow well beyond its actual numbers. This means that more people will become acquainted with and influenced by its positive *and* negative ideas and actions.

During his speech on the Mall, the theocratic Farrakhan said that America's saving grace is her ideal of freedom. He

acknowledged that in many other countries, he would not be allowed to speak out so candidly or forcefully (and ironically, these countries include some of those he supports, such as Iran and Sudan). Indeed, there is a message here for everyone.

Freedom is useful mainly to those who have the courage to use it. Just as Farrakhan has the right to criticize his detractors, his detractors have the right—indeed, the moral obligation—to criticize him. More black thinkers, writers, scholars, spokespersons, and grass-roots leaders must come forward to challenge Farrakhan's sexism, homophobia, bigotry, irrationality, and so forth. He must not be given *carte blanche* to be as outrageous as he chooses. And those who support him must realize that he is neither perfect nor above criticism. The right kinds of criticism create better individuals and strong institutions. As Eleanor Roosevelt wisely remarked: "Never fear criticism when you're right. Never ignore it when you're wrong." This is advice that everyone should mind. •

Mania in the Stadia: The Origins and Goals of Promise Keepers

Russ Bellant

"Promise Keepers" is a rapidly growing Christian men's movement that last year rallied about three hundred thousand men, filling six football stadia in colorful displays of male "spiritual renewal." The group plans to double the number of participants and stadium events in 1996. While projecting an image of spirituality, leaders of the Promise Keepers seem to be bent on gaining social and political power. In the world of Promise Keepers, men are to submit to a cell group that in turn is closely con-

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trolled by a national hierarchy. Most important, women are to submit absolutely to their husbands or fathers.

Promise Keepers may be the strongest, most organized effort to capitalize on male backlash in the country today. Conceived by University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney in 1990, Promise Keepers says men should "reclaim" authority from their wives—to whom they have supposedly ceded too much.

Bill McCartney's goal in 1990 was to fill a sports stadium with Christian men to exhort them into his philosophy. The following year, he attracted 4,200 men to a basketball arena; 22,000 men came to

Boulder's Folsom Stadium in 1992, followed by 50,000 men in 1993.¹

Promoted by powerful elements of the Religious Right, Promise Keepers filled six stadia in 1994; the largest event was in the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, which drew 62,000 men. The only women present were custodians and concession workers.²

In 1995, Promise Keepers events in Detroit and Los Angeles drew over 72,000 each.³

Don't Ask, Take

The manifesto of the movement is *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, a book published for the group by James Dobson's organization, Focus on the Family.⁴ Evangelist Tony Brown, in his contributing essay, explains how to deal with women. "I can hear you saying, 'I want to be a spiritually pure man. Where do I start?' The first thing you do," Brown writes, "is sit down with your wife and say something like this: 'Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.' Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to *take it back*" (emphasis in the original).⁵ While insisting to male readers that there is to be "no compromise" on authority, he suggests that women readers submit for the "survival of our culture."

Total Submission

While serving as an assistant coach at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Bill McCartney encountered and was deeply influenced by the Word of God (WOG) community. McCartney has said that WOG leader Jim Berlucci is one of the two men who most influenced his life.⁶ WOG, a select and insular group of about 1,600 adults, practiced "shepherding/discipleship," which required total submission to a person called the "head." Members were required to submit their schedules in advance and account for every hour of every day. Marriage partners, movie choices, jobs, and other decisions also had to be approved by this leader.

Members who questioned authority, or women who question their extreme submission to men, were subject to often traumatic "exorcisms." WOG members were trained to see the world with suspicion and contempt—as an enemy. They believed that they were specially chosen by God to fight the Antichrist.⁷

When McCartney was hired by the University of Colorado, WOG introduced him to the WOG-linked "Vineyard" church, which has a parish in Boulder. Vineyard churches emphasize "signs and wonders" and "prophecy." Vineyard leader John Wimber calls their work "power evangelism" and describes his followers as "self-conscious members of God's army, sent to do battle against the forces of the kingdom of darkness. . . . One is either in God's Kingdom," Wimber insists, "or Satan's."⁸

'The Purpose of War'

McCartney's pastor at the Boulder Valley Vineyard, the Reverend James Ryle, whom McCartney says is the other major influence in his life,⁹ conducts a "prophetic" ministry and participates in conferences with men who claim to be prophets in the first-century sense of the term.¹⁰

Ryle believes Promise Keepers, of which he is a board member,¹¹ is the fulfillment of the biblically prophesied end-time army described in the Book of Joel—a terrifying army from which there is no escape. "Never have 300,000 men come together through human history," he declared, "except for the purpose of war." He says he has a vision of Promise Keepers purging America of secularism, which he considers "an abortion" of godliness.¹²

Ryle spoke last year at a secret Colorado conclave to plan anti-gay/lesbian electoral strategies. He said, "America is in the midst of a cultural revolution, which has poised our nation precariously on the brink of moral chaos, which is caused by what I am referring to as the crisis of homosexuality."¹³

While Promise Keepers is not currently a political force in its own right, McCartney leads by example. He has repeatedly attacked reproductive rights,¹⁴ and he campaigned for the 1992 anti-gay

Amendment 2 ballot initiative as a member of the board of Colorado for Family Values, the sponsor of the initiative.¹⁵

His rally addresses have been uncompromising. "Take the nation for Jesus Christ," he directed in 1992.¹⁶ The following year he said, "What you are about to hear is God's word to the men of this nation. We are going to war as of tonight. We have divine power; that is our weapon. We will not compromise. Wherever truth is at risk, in the schools or legislature, we are going to contend for it. We will win."¹⁷

No less militant is Promise Keepers co-founder Dave Wardell,¹⁸ who told the *Denver Post*, "We want our nation to return to God. We're drawing a line in the sand here. . . . There has already been controversy about abortion and homosexuality. I hope there won't be any physical confrontations. . . ."¹⁹

Something Like Punching Your Lights Out

Promise Keepers's national staff has grown rapidly from a handful to 250, with a \$64 million budget.²⁰ But its significance is primarily at the local and church levels.

Promise Keepers urges men to form "accountability" groups of no more than five members, within which they are expected to submit all aspects of their lives to review and rebuke. Each member must answer any probes concerning his marriage, family, finances, sexuality, or business activity.²¹

Such cells, usually operating within a church or parachurch group, are led by a "Point Man" who answers to an "Ambassador" who reports to headquarters in Boulder. Decisions about local or state activity are ultimately made in Boulder.²²

"All of our success here is contingent upon men taking part in small groups when they return home," Promise Keepers spokesman Steve Chavis told *Christianity Today*. Less elegantly, Dave Wardell, the national coordinator for local leaders, explains, "I can go home and maybe still be the same guy after a conference. But if I have another guy calling up, holding me accountable, asking, 'How are you treating your wife? Are you still cheating on your income taxes? Are you looking at

your secretaries with lust?' it makes a difference. I don't think a woman would get in my face, go toe to toe with a guy, whereas a guy could tell me, 'I don't like it. And if you don't listen to me, I'll punch your lights out.' Something like that."²³

These principles and structures, which are similar to the shepherding discipleship model of the Word of God, would take years to implement and produce a highly disciplined group. Most men drawn to Promise Keepers have probably never heard of shepherding/discipleship (which is still not widely known even within the evangelical community)²⁴ and may be deeply offended if they experience the degree of manipulation and control (to which they may be "submitting" themselves and their families) as has occurred in many shepherding/disciple situations.

Trojan Horses?

Top Christian Right leaders in the past year have joined Dobson in promoting Promise Keepers. These have notably included Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition and "700 Club," D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries, and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. Dobson who along with Robertson, Kennedy, and Bright, is a member of the secretive, radical-right Council for National Policy,²⁵ is a central figure in Promise Keepers. Not only is he the publisher of the main text of the movement, he is a featured speaker at Promise Keeper events, which in turn sell tapes of his speeches.

Focus on the Family's network of political action groups, called Community Impact Committees, function much like Promise Keepers' cell groups within conservative churches. Largely invisible to individuals outside these churches, these committees are organized at the state and regional levels and controlled from Colorado.²⁶

Both Dobson's Community Impact Committees and the Promise Keepers cells are potential Trojan horses within churches and denominations, creating conflicting loyalties and lines of authority. Leaders of Promise Keepers, in particular, come out of a movement that sees denominations as inhibiting evangelism and

revivalism. Indicative of this is its use of Strang Communications to publish *New Man* magazine. Strang's *Charisma* magazine is contemptuous of traditional denominations. The senior editor of Strang's *New Ministries* magazine, Jack Hayford, is also on the board of Promise Keepers.

Promise Keepers has scheduled more than a dozen rallies for purity, fidelity, and possibly social and political domination for 1996. Promise Keepers had planned for over a year to draw one million men to march in Washington, D.C., just prior to the November 1996 elections. Now postponed, the plans were evidently modeled after the Christian Right rallies called "Washington for Jesus," which had similar backing and were held during the presidential elections in 1980 and 1988.²⁷

Considering the high-level backing by the leadership of the Christian Right, and the anti-democratic views of Promise Keepers' leaders, this movement ought not be underestimated.

Notes

1. James Dobson, Bill Bright, Edwin Cole, Tony Evans, Bill McCartney, Luis Palau, Randy Phillips, Gary Smalley, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, Focus on the Family, 1994, p. 6. See also, *Promise Keepers Fact Sheet*, October 1994.
2. Author's observation at the event.
3. *National and International Religion Report*, May 15, 1995.
4. Dobson, et al., op. cit.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 79. This passage appears under the sub-heading "Reclaiming Your Manhood."
6. Author's interview with McCartney, October 1994.
7. Russ Bellant, "When Right Goes Wrong," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 18, 1988. Also author's extensive interviews with former

WOG members and internal WOG documents.

8. *Ibid.*, John Wimber, speech at Charismatic Renewal conference, audiotape, August 1990; John Wimber, "Power Evangelism: An Encounter of People of God," *First Fruits*, March/April 1986. Also the May 1995 *Charisma* magazine reports that Promise Keepers' top leaders are affiliated with Vineyard churches but they seek to draw participants from all denominational backgrounds.

9. McCartney interview, op. cit.

10. A "prophet" claims to receive messages directly from God. To many believers, a prophecy can have as much or more validity than the Bible itself.

11. Promise Keepers data sheet. See also, *Charisma*, May 1995, p. 45.

12. Author's interview with James Ryle, October 1994.

13. Tim Kingston, "Blueprint for Hate: Contents of Secret Colorado Anti-Gay Election Kit Revealed," *San Francisco Bay Times*, May 19, 1994.

14. Michael Romano, "Keeping the Promise of God," *Rocky Mountain News*, July 17, 1994.

15. Michael Mills, "Promise Keepers Send an Alarming Message," *Boulder Daily Camera*, July 28, 1994.

16. Michael Romano, "Coach's Comments on Gays, Religion Draw Ire of Many," *Rocky Mountain News*, July 17, 1994.

17. *Boulder Daily Camera*, op. cit.

18. Promise Keepers Fact Sheet.

19. Johnette Howard, "At Colorado, a Coach and a Christian," *Washington Post*, October 25, 1994.

20. "Promise Keepers' Update," *Charisma*, Oct. 95, p. 38.

21. John Maxwell, speech at Promise Keepers Indianapolis rally, June 6, 1994, p. 4.

22. Promise Keepers, "Ambassador," training manual.

23. *Washington Post*, op. cit.

24. Bellant, op. cit. See also, Sara Diamond, "Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right," *South End Press*, 1988.

25. See Russ Bellant, "The Council for National Policy: Stealth Leadership of the Radical Right," *Front Lines Research*, August 1994.

26. *Community Impact Handbook*, Focus on the Family, 1993; Community Impact Seminar, Detroit, Michigan, August 1993.

27. Fred Clarkson, "The Second Coming: The Politics of Washington for Jesus '88," *City Paper*, April 29, 1988.

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