BEYOND PROMISES: A BIBLICAL CHALLENGE
TO PROMISE KEEPERS (Excerpt)

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[Editor’s Note: The following article is adapted with permission from Beyond Promises: A Biblical Challenge to Promise Keepers (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996). Beyond Promises takes a balanced look at the Promise Keepers movement, applauding what it has done well and pointing out where, in the movement’s own language, it needs to “raise the standard” in the days to come. The book is divided into four parts. Part One (“At Its Best”) commends the movement for what it has done well and responds to unfounded criticisms of the movement. Part Two (“Some Causes for Concern”) raises several general concerns with the movement. Part Three (“Promises, Promises”) examines the now-famous seven promises. And Part Four (“Beyond Promises”) challenges the movement and its followers, to move beyond human promises to the only Promise Keeper there ever was—our Lord Jesus Christ. To order a copy of the book, please call 1-800-488-2034.]

Chapter Fourteen: Breaking Down the Walls—Promise 6

A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.¹

In order to be right with anyone or anything else, men must first be right with God. In order to be biblically “unified” with others, we must first find unity and peace with God. But how can a man be right with God? This question is really at the heart of the Christian faith—the good news of the Christian message—which, as we have seen, addresses this question directly.

But this same question also reveals a significant problem with how Promise Keepers seeks to communicate this gospel message. In this chapter, we will look first at the gospel message itself, and then the problems this gospel message causes for the vision of racial and denominational unity sought by Promise Keepers in Promise 6.

Start Spreading the News

As Christians, we are called to spread the good news of the gospel. But what is that good news? We might classify two types of good news. The first is good news out of the blue—when one inherits an unexpected but vast fortune, for example. But the second kind of good news depends upon a previous understanding of some kind of bad news. The Greek word for gospel literally means “good news,” but it is good news which falls in this second category. Just as a man cannot understand the good news of a governor’s pardon if he does not understand himself
to be on death row, so we cannot understand salvation from sin if we do not understand our own sinfulness. The Bible teaches that this understanding of sinfulness comes only from the law of God (Rom. 3:20; 5:20). The law is a perfect reflection of the character of a holy God—the God with whom we must be reconciled.

He is good, and we are not. In our own nature, we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-2). Apart from Christ’s intervention, we are slaves to our sinfulness (Rom. 6:6). As natural men, we cannot even understand spiritual things (I Cor. 2:14), much less trust in them for salvation. Paul teaches that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. This is indeed a desperate situation. The cross is our only hope of salvation, and apart from Christ, that message is foolishness to us (I Cor. 1:18). Without God and without hope in the world, our situation apart from God is utterly desperate. We need a Savior, and the Bible teaches that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Now the exact meaning of this word *alone* is very important. Not only does it mean that there are no Saviors *in addition* to Jesus Christ, it also means there are no Saviors *in combination* with Jesus Christ. As evangelical Christians, we reject the idea that salvation is found apart from Christ; our Lord is not one of four available Saviors. But also as evangelical Christians, we should reject the idea that Christ needs help in saving us since He also is our salvation. Because Christ alone is our salvation, we can say that salvation is all of grace. And grace, by its very nature, does not combine at all with any human effort or work. As Paul put it, “And if by grace, then it is no longer of words; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Rom. 11:6).

This is the biblical message. The grace found in Jesus Christ does not mix with anything else. The ground of our salvation is the person and work of Christ alone. Now as we look at church history, we see many attempts to subvert or twist this message so that it is no longer the biblical good news, the gospel message which saves.

Some such attempts at twisting the message have had more success in deception than others, and of course none of them has been completely honest in the advertising. No one comes to the front door, hands you a tract, and says, “Hello, I am here representing my father the devil, and I would like to share a false gospel with you.” Rather, these subversions of the gospel have regularly come in the name of Christ. “For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor. 11:14-15).

As shown above, a doctrine central to the Christian faith is the truth that we are saved by faith, on the basis of the goodness of somebody else. Faith is the instrument of salvation, and the cross of Christ, its ground. To reverse this emphasis is to subvert the gospel. This reversal says we are saved by Jesus Christ on the basis of our faith. But the great Reformer, Martin Luther, said that the proper understanding of justification by faith alone is the mark of a standing or falling church. This issue, this point of division, was one of the central points of controversy in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. As a result of this controversy, the gospel was recovered, and clearly proclaimed by classical and orthodox Protestants. Are we saved on the
basis of the goodness of Christ alone, received through the instrument of faith alone? Or are we saved by the goodness of Christ in combination with other efforts and decisions?

In the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic church held an ecumenical council which is known as the Council of Trent. During this council, the Roman Catholic church unambiguously repudiated the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. In fact, it pronounced anathemas on anyone who believed it: “If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema [cursed, ed.]”.

The issue was whether or not the ground of our salvation is the righteousness of Christ alone, and whether or not we receive His righteousness by and through the instrument of faith alone. The ramifications of this doctrinal disagreement were and are immense. Nothing less was at stake than fidelity to the gospel itself. In the years since Trent, the Roman Catholic church has done nothing which modified her horrifying repudiation of the gospel.

Properly understood, it was not the Protestants who separated themselves from the church, but rather, the Roman Catholic church which separated itself from the gospel and hence, from the church.

Unequally Yoked?

But what does all this have to do with Promise Keepers? Promise Keepers plays down the rift between Protestants and Catholics, treating it as unimportant. Jack Hayford, in Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, for example, says, “Whether your tradition celebrates it as Communion, Eucharist, the Mass, or the Lord’s Supper, we are all called to this centerpiece of Christian worship.” Hayford has reduced the centrality of the cross to a matter of personal preference: you may like chocolate, and I may like vanilla, but we all call it ice cream.

In an address at more than one Promise Keepers conference, the founder of Promise Keepers and former Roman Catholic, Bill McCartney, said, “Now hear this. Promise Keepers doesn’t care if you are a Catholic. Do you love Jesus? Are you born of the Spirit of God?”

Promise Keepers could not make these claims if it believed that the doctrinal issues traditionally separating Protestants from Catholics are central. This means that classical Protestants who still believe the gospel is central, are excluded from Promise Keepers based on the stand Promise Keepers has taken. In other words, unity is possible between Catholicism and Promise Keepers, but is impossible with convinced Protestants as long as Catholicism separates itself from gospel truth. We are not trying to strain at gnats here, but we must see that this is not a dispute over whether the choir should walk up the left or right aisle—this question concerns the very definition of what is means to be a Christian. However, Promise Keepers is treating the differences between Protestants and Catholics as just another “denominational” difference.

Even while we object to the false unity promoted by Promise Keepers, we are not
maintaining that all Catholics are unregenerate. We are convinced that many members of that communion have been converted while in her midst. They are in good company. The same can be said of Wyclif, Hus, Luther, and Calvin, just to name a few. The issue is not individual Catholics, but rather, the formal stand taken by the institution of the Roman Catholic church itself, repudiating the gospel and cursing those who understand and embrace it. Therefore, the duty of those Catholics who have come to saving faith is to leave that church as soon as they possibly can. Further, it is the duty of all confessing Protestants to encourage and aid them as they leave. The position taken by Promise Keepers is not merely that individual Catholics can be regenerate. If that were the issue, there would be no controversy. The problem is the formal position of the Catholic church, that of repudiating the gospel, and the formal position of Promise Keepers accepting that church as a Christian church regardless.

Given Promise Keepers’ position, it is not surprising that Roman Catholic leaders have supported the movement wholeheartedly. Assuaging any possible fear that Promise Keepers is out to proselytize Roman Catholics, one priest in the Los Angeles area was recently quoted by The Los Angeles Times as saying that “Promise Keepers places a very strong emphasis on returning to your own church congregation or parish and becoming an active layman.”4 This same priest was previously quoted in the official newspaper of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, The Tidings, as commending Promise Keepers because “(t)here is no attempt at proselytizing or drawing men away from their faith to another church.”5 The Tidings thus endorsed the Promise Keepers movement and encouraged Roman Catholic men to attend the Los Angeles conference in 1995:

Promise Keepers is a basic program of evangelization for men of faith, begun among more fundamentalist and evangelical Christian communities, but now being expanded to include Catholic congregations.6

Months earlier, Cardinal Roger Mahoney of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, had written that he was “very interested to know how the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and I could be of assistance in the fuller promotion of Promise Keepers” and said that he “would be open to any suggestions...[regarding] an expansion of the Promise Keeper concept among our Catholic men.”7 Since then, Roman Catholics have been involved promoting Promise Keepers in many states. Quite a few of the many “Wake Up Calls” sponsored by Promise Keepers have featured the Roman Catholic clergy as key speakers, as though the Roman Catholic church were just another denomination. Even then, however, Promise Keepers plays down denominational differences.

In the end, the official Promise Keepers position calls us to transcend and overlook the barriers between Catholics and Protestants. By so doing, Promise Keepers calls us to transcend and overlook the gospel.

The Heart of Reconciliation

The formal position of the Roman Catholic church on justification by faith alone is entirely at odds with the biblical position. Regardless of the personal standing of individual
Catholics, the formal Catholic position must be formally rejected by any self-professing evangelical organization, movement, or institution. Through explicit statements, such as those given above, and the policy of accepting Catholics as simply members of “just another denomination,” it seems clear that Promise Keepers as an institution is not willing to take the stand that doctrinal integrity requires.

At best, the stand Promise Keepers has taken is the result of doctrinal confusion. At worst, it is the result of conviction—a conviction that salvation by faith alone is a peripheral doctrine. In either case, whether it stems from a deep-seated confusion or an erroneous conviction, the men involved with Promise Keepers are effectively hindered in fulfilling Promise 1. Recall that Promise 1 speaks of “honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to God’s Word”—the very thing Promise Keepers renders impossible by its own doctrinal compromise. Justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel, and one of the central teachings of Scripture, and it is this truth which sets us free to study and understand the rest of God’s Word. Not only is this gospel true, it is declared at the point where we enter into all truth. “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright within him; but the just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

In order to obey the gospel, we must first understand it. “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (I Pet. 4:17). Paul says something very similar when he refers to those who will be judged because they “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:8). In Scripture, if we truly believe the gospel, we will obey the gospel.

But we cannot obey the gospel if we have not heard and understood it. As we showed earlier, a proper understanding of the gospel is not natural to the natural man. In order to understand the saving gospel, it must be declared faithfully, clearly, plainly, bluntly, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. “And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14).

Jesus Christ cannot be honored through a disobedient or confused approach to the knowledge of His Father. Because of Christ’s perfect obedience, a sinner may come to the Father through the instrument of faith alone. But if he confuses the obedience of Christ with his own obedience through faith, then he has confused the difference between grace and works. And that confusion, the Bible tells us, is eternally fatal.

By blurring the central doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, Promise Keepers has tragically obscured and confused the way to the Father. And because Promise Keepers’ theology of vertical reconciliation with God is flawed, so is its theology of horizontal reconciliation with man. We will never be able to effect true vertical reconciliation since the latter is the basis of the former. Without being reconciled to God by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, we can never be truly reconciled to one another.

**Questions About Unity**
We began this chapter with a discussion of the nature of the gospel—the only possible foundation for biblical unity. Contrasted with this is the humanistic desire for unity—“c’mon, people now, smile on your brother”—which appears to be based on nothing more than our common humanity. Obviously, blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, evangelicals and Rotary Club members all share a common humanity. Consequently, the law of God requires that we treat one another as created in the image of God. But treating one another with the dignity which a common humanity requires, and treating one another as brothers in Christ are two entirely different things. The first is based upon the authority of God over creation, while the second is based upon the truth revealed in Christ in redemption.

Now Promise Keepers has clearly fallen into the trap of accepting a blurred humanistic vision of unity, rather than the unity in Christ which the Bible sets before us. This can be seen in how this year’s theme of “Break Down the Walls” is being promoted. As one Promise Keeper letter put it, the enemy which we must overcome is “racial and denominational distrust.” The language of Promise 6 is very similar. We are to reach past any “racial and denominational barriers” in order to achieve unity. Clearly, racial and denominational differences are being lumped together, and we are urged to overcome them in the same way. But racial differences are God-given and part of His creation design, while denominational differences are the result of our sinfulness, ignorance, and shortsightedness.

Racial harmony is achieved when we learn to accept Christian brothers the way God made them. Denominational differences are to be reconciled by coming together to study the Scriptures (Acts 17:11), in a spirit that is willing to strive for “likemindedness” (Rom. 15:5; Phil. 2:2,20). Where denominational differences exist, they are to be removed as a result of one side, or the other, or both, changing in order to submit to the teaching of Scripture. We must affirm racial differences; we must never affirm our sinful disagreements. Doctrinal differences can and should be resolved through Bible study. But you could study the Bible until you turned blue, and that wouldn’t change your color...well, you know what we mean. Until we arrive at likemindedness, we should certainly not be disagreeable. And if this were all that Promise Keepers meant in Promise 6, there would be no difficulty. But much more is involved: the authority of truth.

This principle, as with so much else, is acknowledged at some points by some representatives of Promise Keepers. For example, Promise Keepers Vice President of Ministry Advancement, E. Glenn Wagner admits that “unity is not a oneness at the expense of the truth.” He even goes as far as quoting the accomplished Bible commentator, William Hendriksen, who, in expositing Christ’s prayer for unity in John 17, wrote, “Believers, therefore should always yearn for peace, but never for peace at the expense of truth, for unity which has been gained by means of such a sacrifice is not worthy of the name.” This is wonderfully stated. In this same book, Wagner goes still further by saying, “Unity is not an ecumenical endeavor to find the lowest common denominator among people even if it means denying cardinal doctrines such as the deity of Christ or the inerrancy of the Scriptures.” Amen.

But the practical application of this concept by Promise Keepers is quite different. Elsewhere, in the very same book, unity is described as ultimately being a matter of relationship. Unity is “being in relationship to one another.” “It is this idea of relationship that will bring us
into unity.”¹⁷ No. It is truth that unites. It is truth that results in our relationships with one another in the body of Christ. It is the truth of the gospel that makes us brothers in the first place. We know certain facts to be true—that we are sinners, that Christ lived a life of perfect obedience for us and died in our place, that He rose again; we assent to or agree with those truths; and we trust in them for our salvation. Then, we are brought into relationship with one another. We can have no true fellowship with those who part from the core truths of the faith. Relationship is the result of unity, not the other way around.

Wagner argues that doctrine divides truth from error and unites us around the truth.¹⁸ He then gives the example of a friend who believes that we can be saved based on our good works and shows how he cannot be unified with him in this belief. We concur, but hasn’t Wagner just contradicted the official Promise Keepers stance on fellowship with those who deny the doctrine of justification? On the one hand, Promise Keepers has affirmed the fundamentals of the faith, but on the other, they have stated that we must overcome denominational barriers—barriers which were created by a denial of these fundamentals. If Roman Catholicism is considered just another denomination, then this emphasis on primary truth is inconsistent. And if the truth on the primaries of the gospel cannot be compromised, then the stance toward Roman Catholicism is inconsistent. Promise Keepers cannot have it both ways.

Part of the problem regarding the Promise Keepers stand on unity stems from a misunderstanding of Matthew 18:15-17. Says Wagner,

“If someone disagrees with us in one of the five fundamentals [the doctrines of Scripture, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Redemption] Matthew 18 comes into play. The so-called believer who does not hold to the truth is committing sin—specifically the sin of heresy—and therefore he or she must be put out of the local church fellowship and/or the denomination.”¹⁹

But can Wagner truly say that the Roman Catholic Church adheres to the five essentials as Promise Keepers has defined them in The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs? We have a problem here. If Promise Keepers truly believes that the five truths articulated in The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs are the dividing line, then it has acted inconsistently with that dividing line.

As we see it, Promise Keepers wanted to have an official position it could “point to” in order to calm the fears of those who believed it was compromising the gospel. So it sanctioned The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs. But then the movement still continues to work with institutions that are avowed enemies of the gospel as defined in that book. Promise Keepers now has the best of both worlds. They have an answer for every critic—with one exception: the critic who points out inconsistencies. If the dividing line is as announced in The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs, then it must be enforced across the board and down the line. If not, Promise Keepers must say so.

Drawing the Line
The problems caused by this type of compromise are not going to stop at the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Principles, or lack of them, can be applied in any number of situations. During the Promise Keepers 1995 conference in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Times reported that “because of Promise Keepers’ interdenominational approach, attorney Chip Rawlings and fellow Mormon leaders...are urging members of the Latter-day Saints to participate in the movement.” Why? Because to Rawlings, “The movement’s ‘Seven Promises’ are like something straight out of the men’s priesthood manual for the [Mormon] church.”

Earning one’s salvation is evidently a crowd pleaser. The only question is whether it pleases God.

We wholeheartedly agree that Christians are not to squabble and fight over whether we should baptize with heads upstream or downstream. An emphasis on truth includes the truth that Christians are to love the peace of Christ’s kingdom, and are to maintain a sense of biblical priorities. As Wagner himself put it,

We must be careful not to call people to an inferior cause. We need to stop championing causes that are divisive to the body; instead we must call people to a unifying cause, which is the proclamation of the gospel and the expansion of the kingdom.

Absolutely.

But what is the gospel? And what is involved in the expansion of His kingdom? Do we shy away from controversy, say, over the deity of Christ, for example, because we might offend those, like the Mormons, who claim to be in the body of Christ but who deny that doctrine? Do we shy away from the doctrine of the Trinity? If not, why not? The answer is that we must speak where Scripture speaks. But if we must speak where Scripture speaks, then we must make sure that we are speaking everywhere Scripture speaks. We must not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God, as Paul says in Acts 20:27. True integrity demands nothing less.

Besides, who is divisive? Those who teach false doctrine as gospel truth or those who correct false gospel with gospel truth? The answer which Scripture gives is the former, not the latter. If the heretic or errant brother can claim a soapbox why can’t the true believer correct him in love? Isn’t that what Priscilla and Aquilla did with Apollos? Even thought he was “mighty in the Scriptures,” he needed to be taken aside and have the way of God explained to him more accurately. Paul, too, was divisive when he corrected Peter and Barnabas in their hypocrisy. The bottom line is that doctrine divides. It divides truth from error. Ideas have consequences. If you have the idea that you need to save yourself by what you do, it could have devastating eternal consequences. Someone who loves you would make it an issue.

Christians in times past unified around what they believed. Now we are called to unify around a common experience that we can share with thousands of others who may not believe that Christ is the only hope of salvation. What kind of unity is this, really? We do not believe it is the unity commended to us in the Bible. Unfortunately, Promise 6 requires us to blur certain distinctions which Scripture requires us to keep sharp.

In the end, those who refuse to embrace the true gospel are the ones who have separated
themselves from the body of Christ. They are the ones who need to repent. They are the ones who need to be reconciled—first to God, and then, to their brothers, whether they be black, yellow, red or white. The only reconciliation possible is on the rock solid foundation of the gospel. Any other foundation is sinking sand.

1 Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, p. 8, 153.
3 SPPK, p. 19
6 Ibid.
9 Quoted in TAPSB, p. 25.
10 TAPSB, p. 22.
11 Ibid., p. 23.
12 Ibid., p. 11.
13 Ibid., p. 34-35.
14 Ibid., p. 180.
15 Ibid., p. 11.
16 Ibid., p. 34-35.
17 Ibid., p. 180.
18 Ibid., p. 180.
19 Ibid., p. 180.
21 TAPSB, p. 9.

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—Editor