A stadium of hope: A rhetorical analysis of the Promise Keepers

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A STADIUM OF HOPE: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF

THE PROMISE KEEPERS

by

Matthew H. Barton
Bachelor of Science
Southern Utah University
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

A Stadium of Hope: A Rhetorical Analysis of The Promise Keepers

by

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The historical ebb and flow of the Men's Christian Movement has been one of interest and concern to the American public. This concern surfaced once again with the popularity of the Promise Keepers organization. This paper focuses on the rhetorical discourse and strategies of the Promise Keepers organization from a social movement perspective. This study examines the evolutionary stages through which social movements evolve; look at specific examples of the discourse to examine the persuasive appeals; and address the leadership tactics and character of Bill McCartney, founder of the Promise Keepers.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Literature</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 THE ORIGIN OF THE PROMISE KEEPERS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rallies and Promises</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books, Magazines and the Internet</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of PK</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Vineyard Church</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Strength of a Leader</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PK Benefits Package</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF THE PROMISE KEEPERS’ RHETORIC</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Genesis Stage</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Unrest Stage</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Mobilization Stage</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise Keepers and the Maintenance Stage</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Dominance: Reclaiming Your Manhood</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality: Hating the Sin and Loving the Sinner</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Reconciliation: All That Glitters is not Gold</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stadium: Three Cheers for Coach Mac</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have we learned?</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I can hear you saying, “I want to be a spiritually pure man. Where do I start?” The first thing you do 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... there can be no compromise here. If you’re going to lead, you must lead. Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently and lovingly. But lead! (Tony Evans in Janssen, 1994, pp. 79-80.)

For many feminists, Tony Evans’ words may be an all too pungent reminder of the political inequality that women endured before suffrage and the reality that women make considerably lower wages than men working the same job today, but for many men in the 1990s it has become a rallying cry that represents a chance for significant change. The group responsible for this return to the past is the Promise Keepers. This high-energy, non-denominational Christian organization is filling football stadiums around the nation with men who are turning to God and the Bible for answers to problems in their often troubled lives: “They meld two Sunday traditions—attending church and going to football games—into a unique blend of testosterone-charged activity that one attendee in Houston described as the Super Bowl of Christianity” (Mattox, 1995, p. 39).

The Promise Keepers was founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, former head football coach at the University of Colorado. This “men only” movement is
headquartered in Denver, but this para-church organization travels to cities like New York, Dallas, and Washington D.C. to help men find concrete answers to the puzzling aspects of their lives in massive two-day stadium rallies. Some individuals believe that this group is the revival of a forgotten men’s movement: “The movement began in the 1980s with small groups of men . . . meeting to share their pains, hurts, and frustrations that resulted from experiences with drunken fathers, emasculating bosses, stifling jobs, divorce laws, child custody fights, or advertisements and television programs that portray men as fools” (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994, p. 74). Building on this description, Promise Keepers President Randy Phillip believes that, “Christian men have finally come out of hibernation and are seeing their need to come together . . . I think it’s time to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is igniting a flame in the hearts of men all over the nation” (In Gilbreath, 1995, p. 22). Promise Keepers is asking men everywhere to “come to Christ” by committing their lives to seven promises, so they too can be promise keepers.

Like every authentic movement, Promise Keepers has tapped into a reservoir of social concern and yearning . . . Much of the appeal of Promise Keepers traces to the times. Family life and personal responsibility have slipped drastically over the past few decades. Both President Clinton and former Vice President Dan Quayle have called for a recovery of family responsibility. They and many others agree on at least two things: the family is in trouble, and the solution is more moral and spiritual than political (Snyder, 1994, p. 20).
Justification

What is the Promise Keepers and why should this group be studied? The answer to these questions is best understood by examining the impact Promise Keepers (PK) is having on men's lives around the country. The following is an example of one of the many success stories credited to PK:

A decision was made in a gray BMW driving back to Minneapolis from the Boulder '93 Promise Keepers conference that would impact four lives forever . . .

As the miles stretched on traveling to Boulder and darkness settled, so did the lightness of their conversation. Somehow in the darkness, a safety zone was created—a place where each, looking forward, felt the freedom to discuss topics he would never ordinarily touch. Tom and Chuck shared about their troubled marriages. Gary went where many pastors dared not go—he shared the struggles of being a pastor (Face 2 Face, 1997, p.1, http://www2.promisekeepers.org/manual/news/november97/p4.htm).

These life changing events have left critics wondering what makes the Promise Keepers so successful: An article in The Economist (1995) offers one explanation for the strong interest shown in PK: "American men have seen their traditional dominance challenged at home and at work. They face confusing new rules of sexual engagement. They are fumbling their way between old ideas of manliness and new demands of sensitivity" (p. 21).

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (1997) feels that the expansion of PK comes from a
perceived social need that many men share in the 1990s, "the massive changes in the workplace brought about by the ending of the cold war, by the global economy, and by the computer revolution; second, the feminist critique—three decades in the making—of patriarchal gender relations; and finally, a genuine disillusionment and alarm over the excesses of individualism in North American society" (p. 238). Van Leeuwen emphasizes that these changes have added to nearly everyone's insecurity, but she views men as being particularly impacted. The "effects are compounded for men in a society that has traditionally identified masculinity with economic power. Hence as men's earning capacity goes down compared to earlier times so, for many, does their sense of adequacy as male human beings" (p. 239). Many men are searching for the antidote to these social inadequacies and do not seem content to wait for the answers to come to them: "After being told continuously that masculinity is bad, many men are now searching for their identity, asking who they are as men and how they can live as honoring to God and true to the essence of who they are as men. And they are finding answers at the big Promise Keepers rallies with other men" (Harvey and Thiessen, 1996, p. 33). As the interest in the Promise Keepers increases, so does the importance of studying the organization.

PK attempts to make men more dedicated and responsible in their "natural" roles as leaders at home and in society. Therefore one useful approach to studying this movement is to analyze the effects PK has on the way men govern their lives. Since Promise Keepers is focused on social changes like racial reconciliation, male leadership
and anti-homosexuality, the notion that PK can be studied as a social movement has
merit.

A social movement argues for significant social change based on the movement’s
calendar of reality: “Social change is any change written or unwritten, in the way society
regulates itself” (Bower, Ochs, Jensen, 1993, p. 4). An organization’s proposal for
change becomes significant when an individual makes judgments like “yes, no or maybe”
after passing an event and its supporting ideas through some sort of value system. In
other words, when a social movement’s rhetoric forces individuals to make value
judgments about joining with or fighting against the movement, then the social movement
is significant. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) define a social movement as “an
organized, uninstitutionalized, and large collectivity that emerges to bring about or to
resist a program of change in societal norms and values, operates primarily through
persuasive strategies, and encounters opposition in a moral struggle” (p. 17).

To clearly understand a social movement, the critic must determine what the
movement is trying to accomplish as well as discover the strategies that the movement
uses to supplant the dominant reality. Promise Keepers reveals its perceived role in its
mission statement: “Promise Keepers is a Christ-centered ministry dedicated to uniting
men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world . . . . We
believe that God wants to use Promise Keepers as a spark in His hand to ignite a
nationwide movement calling men from all denominational, ethnic, and cultural
backgrounds to reconciliation, discipleship and godliness” (PK Mission Statement, 1997,
p. 1).
One way that Promise Keepers attempts to fulfill its mission statement is through the use of huge stadium rallies. These events have gained momentum over the past eight years: “Seventy-two men participated in the first Promise Keepers gathering, in 1990, in Boulder, Colorado. Since then, more than 2 million have attended Promise Keepers stadium events” (PK Fact Sheet, 1997, p. 1). These events help the movement in more ways than one: “At a cost of $50 to $60 per person, the group has recruited new members and raised money at an accelerating rate, reaching an estimated 2 million followers and a 1997 budget of $117 million” (Adlof, 1997, section 13, p. 1). Although PK wants to get more people involved, it does not want to

alert existing churches and denominations to their intent to supplant them, but they have developed a centralized headquarters with thirty-six regional offices serving all fifty states and about 16,000 local groups; independently run spin-offs in Australia, New Zealand and Canada; a daily radio program; and other features of a nondenominational organization—including a fundamentalist theology based upon biblical inerrancy (Swomley, 1997, p. 9).

Additionally, Promise Keepers is competing with the Southern Baptists by targeting Jews for conversion: “It speaks of this as the next frontier in reconciliation and recently convened a meeting of Messianic Jewish leaders in Atlanta, Georgia . . . PK claims approximately 150 Messianic Jewish congregations and nearly 200,000 Messianic believers across the United States” (Swomley, 1997, p. 9).

Another reason to study the impact of the Promise Keepers comes from its rapid growth in the United States and its anticipated outreach into Europe and South America.
This growth is possible thanks to the success of stadium conferences that bring in nearly three million dollars per event (Rudder, 1996).

Promise Keepers should be studied mainly because of its Christian message, but PK's claims to unite all races, its attacks on homosexuality and the discussion of the lack of male leadership in society make a study of this group even more interesting.

Men! ... Do you understand that earth moves heaven? That heaven waits on earth? Are you in touch with the fact that Almighty God surely does in fact have a perfect holy will and that his will is set? However, there is a real problem here because Almighty God has given man a free will! Man makes his own choices! So what we're dealin' with here is that God will not force his will upon man. And prayer is when we ask God to do something' that he already wills to do! ... What Almighty God is doin' is waitin' for the church to come together in [racial] harmony (Spalding, 1996, p. 264)!

In addition to the plan for racial reconciliation, founder Bill McCartney describes PK's outlook on homosexuality, "gay people are curable, [they] are a group of people who don't reproduce, yet want to be compared to people who do reproduce, and [that] lifestyle doesn't entitle anyone to special rights ... Justice-seeking people will not stand by and let this bigotry go unchallenged" (Hetherly, 1997, p. 17). Aside from these candid comments, PK also oversimplifies social problems with its own instant solution: "If men will only commit themselves to honor Christ and practice spiritual and sexual purity, then He will provide brothers to help them, and the land will be healed of many sins, including violent crime and teenage pregnancies" (Harvey and Thiessen, 1996, p. 32). Promise
Keepers requires men to submit to a local cell group that is closely controlled by a national hierarchy. “Most important, women are to submit absolutely to their husbands or fathers” (Bellant, 1995a, p. 81).

PK’s attempts to increase racial harmony and patriarchy while simultaneously hoping to eradicate homosexuality may sound like a simple case of wishful thinking, but the anecdotal evidence on PK’s performance is impressive. A woman at Texas Stadium said of her husband, who had attended a Promise Keepers gathering in Houston: “H. ’s a better husband, a better father, a better everything . . . . He’s steadier; less likely to snap back. His own daughter can see the difference: She’s always been a mamma’s girl . . . . But now she just can’t wait for him to get home at night” (Murchison, 1996, p. 7).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze the rhetoric of the Promise Keepers in order to explain how its discourse is effective in recruiting and maintaining members. Every movement needs loyal followers, but people are often too passive to become involved with a movement’s causes without a genuine effort to educate them about the benefits a particular movement may offer. Social movement studies should, at a minimum, “note the crystallization of fundamental issues, the successive emergence of argument, appeal, counter-argument and counter-appeal . . . .” (Griffin, 1952, p. 349). The critic can accomplish this goal by “an analysis of consequences, the persuasive techniques which were effective and those which were ineffective” (p. 349).

In order to isolate the effectiveness of Promise Keepers’ discourse, this study will
attempt to identify strategies used by the leadership of the Promise Keepers to advance its conservative agenda. The surface appearance of Promise Keepers' plan is to recruit men in order to change their lives, but this agenda appears to have no room for homosexuals, pro-choice supporters, racially biased individuals and feminists.

This study is not intended to provide a complete history of the Promise Keepers, but rather to address the rhetorical tactics that the movement has used successfully. One initial benefit of this approach is its potential contribution to the overall body of knowledge on social movements in general and conservative rhetoric specifically. Since PK was founded in 1990, there is "a well-defined point of origin, easily definable sections and an abundance of documents containing rhetorical records" (Olds, 1996, p. 10). Using a social movement framework can prove to be very rewarding, but like other approaches social movement studies have a challenging hurdle to clear. As rhetorical critic James R. Andrews (1980) notes,

The exciting and frustrating, characteristic of a movement is that it moves, and what makes it move, in large measure, is the way language is manipulated to control or interpret events. In this sense, rhetoric makes moving possible---moving in all directions, pushing, shoving, lurching forward and falling backward as the movement encounters its environment. Growing out of the environment, intruding into the environment, reacting to the environment, and becoming a part of the environment, the social movement is simultaneously a rhetorical response and a rhetorical stimulus (p. 274).
Review of Literature

There are three areas of literature reviewed for the purposes of this study: First, studies focusing on the phases that social movements evolve through and the strategies utilized in each stage; second, background and historical documents discussing the Promise Keepers movement; and third, articles that explain the public's perception of PK and its rhetoric.

The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control is one of the most resourceful social movement publications. In this text Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen (1993) define the stages that social movements evolve through as well as the strategies for change that are employed in the discourse. In addition, the book analyzes the point of view of those in power (or the establishment) and explains the counter-persuasion used by institutions to thwart a social movement. The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control has a solid link to the study of social movements because it defines, applies and examines the complex process of social change by investigating possible causes and consequences of the fascinating human behaviors called agitation and control . . . [and] this study has adopted generalizations and methods from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, political science, and history as well as by communication scholars in order to explain them (p. 1).

A second useful document for this study is Leland Griffin's (1952) essay "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements." Griffin's article is primarily concerned with historical studies. However, Griffin argues that a social movement is a sustained effort that naturally takes time to unfold and has a defined beginning, progression, and
termination. The beginning and progression aspects are applicable to the study of the Promise Keepers because the rhetorical arguments have taken place over several years.

The progression of a social movement is broken down into more understandable sections in Stewart, Smith and Denton’s (1994) *Persuasion and Social Movements*. This text describes the path that social movements follow, highlighting the movement's efforts to gain and maintain a loyal membership. This book is also useful to this study because it can account for the success or failure of the leadership of a movement.

Herbert W. Simon’s (1970) article “Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements,” is an excellent source for this study because it examines the rhetorical processes involved in leading a social movement from the leader's perspective. Simons explores the requirements that a leader must fulfill, the problems that a leader faces, and the strategies that the leader employs to meet these problems.

James R. Andrews’ 1973 article, “The Passionate Negation: The Chartist Movement in Rhetorical Perspective,” and his 1980 article, “History and Theory in the Study of the Rhetoric of Social Movements,” will also serve as guides to help this study focus on specific rhetorical strategies that leaders use to push their ideology forward. Also articles by McEdwards (1968), Leathers (1968) and Hahn and Gonchar (1971) will be used to point out the power of the rhetoric of social movements.

To further the understanding of these arguments, books and chapters by Bellant (1995a), Clatterbaugh (1997) and Messner (1997) provide valuable background information on the Promise Keepers that will be helpful in understanding the group as
well as assessing the relationship, if any, that PK may have with other men’s evangelical movements.

Ken Abraham’s (1997) book *Who Are The Promise Keepers? Understanding the Christian Men’s Movement* breaks down each of the seven promises that members are asked to live by as well as documented examples of how peoples’ lives have been changed by the organization. Abraham (1997) has followed the organization for several years by “tracking it in the news and interviewing numerous people involved in various levels of the organization” (p. 2). In this book, he shares insights about his suspicions and experiences with Promise Keepers and makes evaluations about the effectiveness of the rhetorical strategies the movement has used. Abraham points out, “I could not shake the notion that something significant was happening through the Promise Keepers conferences, judging from the apparent changes in the lives of the men who attended them” (p. 2).

Also the best selling book that has become the manifesto for PK, *The Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, (1994) will be used in this study as a source for rhetorical analysis. This book is composed of a series of essays that outline the principles and applications of each promise.

Two other studies of particular interest are found in *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, and the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. These articles evaluate the impact that the Promise Keepers has had on the lives of men around the nation with the reinforcement of a male led home environment. Further, these articles show the link to sports and expand on the notion that one of the reasons that PK has blossomed is through the appeal of
sports metaphors. The sports metaphor also explains why it is crucial for the movement to be for men only.

The next group of materials comes from the Promise Keepers' national office. Documents from its website, pamphlets, videos, speeches and articles from its monthly magazine, *New Man*, provide official statements about what PK does and does not support. In these documents topics range from homosexuality to racial reconciliation to the Christian takeover of the world. These sources provide the critic with current information that PK is using to gain new recruits, while maintaining the interest of existing members.

A readily available source of information about the Promise Keepers comes from a multitude of articles presented in conservative and non-conservative magazines. These articles explain the experience of a stadium rally and subsequently give important details about the way the movement has presented its ideology to the public. Many of the authors have either interviewed PK conference attendees or attended themselves to help broaden the scope of their evaluations. These analyses are both positive and negative, thereby providing a clearer overall picture of the impact that PK has had. Those publications include: *Free Inquiry* (Bellant, 1995), *The Nation* (Conason and Cokorinos, 1996), *Newsweek* (Cose, 1997, et. al), *Commonweal* (Feuerherd, 1996), *The Humanist* (Franklin and Hetherly, 1997), *Christianity Today* (Gilbreath, 1995, et. al), *Perspectives* (Groothuis and Groothuis, 1995), *Faith Today* (Harvey and Thiessen, 1996), *The Humanist* (Hetherly, 1997, et. al), *The Human Life Review* (Murchison, 1996), *Christian
To further the useful exploration of the public's reaction to the Promise Keepers, stories in the *Chicago Tribune* (Adolph, 1997, et. al), and *The New York Times* (Bruni, 1996, et. al) will be examined for evidence of rhetorical strategies and insight into the plans of the movement. Television interviews from the *Today Show* (1997) and *20/20* (1997) help gain valuable insight about the leadership of the Promise Keepers during interviews with founder Bill McCartney and wife, Lyndi, in light of the march on Washington D.C. in October of 1997.

**Methodology**

In order to study the rhetoric of the Promise Keepers this thesis will rely on the work of Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) which outlines the life cycle of a social movement. According to the authors, social movements mature through the stages of genesis, social unrest, enthusiastic mobilization, maintenance and termination: "a portrayal of each stage in the life cycle of 'typical' social movements can help us understand the ever-changing persuasive requirements, problems, and functions of social movements and the interaction of social-psychological, political-institutional, philosophical-ideological and rhetorical forces" (p. 72). Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) isolate these five areas so that critics can more effectively analyze what the discourse is attempting to do at specific times during the movement's existence. For example, the time from Bill McCartney's first rally (that attracted seventy-two men in...
1990) until three years later when they filled Folsom Stadium in Colorado (about 22,000 attended), would place the Promise Keepers in the genesis stage, because this stage “requires an intellectual or prophet who excels at defining and visualizing . . . [and] transforming perceptions of reality” (p. 85). In the genesis stage, the movement is mainly concerned with educating people about a perceived flaw or moral void in society. Following the Folsom stadium success, PK began its stadium tour, clearly moving it into the social unrest stage as the group boldly stated its ideology by “prescribing courses of action” (p. 85). This example illustrates how a critic can find this “period based method” useful as it inherently organizes the agitator’s rhetoric by describing the events that need to take place in each stage for the movement to be successful.

The ideas of Stewart, Smith and Denton will serve as the framework for this thesis. However, concepts will be supplemented and accented by the Rhetoric of Agitation and Control (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993). This work also examines the discourse of social movements and emphasizes what occurs in each stage of the movement, allowing critics to specify the rhetorical tools (like rallies or demonstrations) used by the agitators during specific time periods. “Important considerations for such an analysis are the structure and function of social organizations, the bases of social power, and the dynamic of rumor transmission” (p. 17). Additionally, Bowers, Ochs and Jensen have a case study (similar to PK) that applies their model to the pro-life abortion group Operation Rescue. Because McCartney supports Operation Rescue, and this organization would clearly be found on the “right” of the political spectrum, the parallels that can be
drawn help ensure the proper application of Bowers, Ochs and Jensen’s ideas and further strengthens their theory by demonstrating its utility.

This investigation begins with the creation of the Promise Keepers organization in 1990 and traces the evolution of its rhetorical strategies to the present. During the examination of this seven year period, the discourse used by the Promise Keepers will be placed into the “appropriate stage” in order to determine its effectiveness. Following a historical background of the Promise Keepers, an analysis of these stages will explore how, and possibly why the discourse changed or remained the same. Documents from the Promise Keepers and those for and against the organization recorded in various media sources will be utilized to determine PK’s impact on the public’s perception. Finally, this investigation will attempt to predict the future of the Promise Keepers and its plans to expand the movement worldwide.

Chapter two of this study will begin by tracing the history of the Promise Keepers from its creation to the present. Also, a brief biography of founder Bill McCartney will be outlined, focusing on his religious affiliations and the catalytic events of his life that ultimately led to the creation of the Promise Keepers. This historical section will attempt to provide a context for PK’s success in the United States.

Chapter three will describe the methodology that will be used to analyze the discourse and impact of the Promise Keepers. This section will show that the Promise Keepers can be studied as a social movement according to the criteria established by Stewart, Smith and Denton. Chapter four will demonstrate the ways in which the Promise Keepers have used specific rhetorical strategies by analyzing PK’s rhetoric in the
Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, and other mass media including the World Wide Web. Additionally sources from their national office and the media accounts previously mentioned in the methodology section will be analyzed.

Chapter five will draw some conclusions and bring the study together to demonstrate how this thesis adds to the knowledge of social movement scholarship. Additionally this chapter will explore the implications of this study. Finally this chapter will suggest the direction that future research might consider when studying the Promise Keepers and similar movements.
CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGIN OF THE PROMISE KEEPERS

Since the early 1970s, people across the United States have been reading about a men’s movement. Most of these accounts depicted men in a difficult struggle to keep up with a rapidly changing society (Clatterbaugh, 1997). Then in the late 1980s, a new perspective on the men’s movement came to the surface. This perspective was based on the writings of the poet Robert Ely. Ely encouraged men to gather to read poetry, beat their chests and talk about their emotional wounds. He believed that “masculinities derive from deep unconscious patterns or archetypes. These patterns are best revealed through a tradition of stories, myths, and rituals. Men and women are essentially different kinds of beings who respond to different kinds of deep needs” (p. 12). What Bly wanted men to do was to envision the future of masculinity without the picture of women and anti-patriarchical ideals.

The success of this mythopoetic movement was soon vaulted to the attention of a larger audience thanks primarily to the success of Bly’s book, Iron John. This book was a national best-seller and it “sparked widespread discussion and debate . . . the book also had another important effect; for the first time, the notion of a men’s movement was on the national agenda” (Messner, 1997, p. 8). The ground breaking approach that Bly used
“may be seen as facilitating the reconstruction of a new form of hegemonic masculinity—
a masculinity that is less self-destructive, that has revalued and reconstructed men’s
emotional bonds with each other . . .” (p. 23-24). The attention that the mythopoetic
movement attracted for men’s rights set the stage for another aspect of the men’s
movement of the 1990s, the Promise Keepers.

As Stewart, Smith, Denton (1994) argue, social movements begin when
individuals, “perceive an imperfection in the existing order. The imperfection may be
institutional or . . . a threat to the social order, values, or environment. Restless
individuals view the imperfection as a serious problem that is likely to grow more severe
unless appropriate institutions address it quickly and in earnest” (p. 72). In other words,
social movements have a history that can be traced to a problem or event in society called
a catalytic event. “Catalytic events cause significant numbers of people to lose faith both
in the ability and willingness of institutions to solve exigencies and the effectiveness of
normal persuasive means to bring about or resist change” (p. 77). Catalytic events
demonstrate how people react to imperfections in society as they attempt to solve them.
The history of the Promise Keepers follows a similar course.

The first of these life-changing events happened in 1973 when founder Bill
McCartney packed up his family and moved from Missouri to Michigan to become the
assistant football coach at the University of Michigan. In Michigan he had his first
exposure to a vibrant patriarchal ideology that would eventually be the birth of the
Promise Keepers (Goodstein, 1997). These were troubled times for the McCartneys, as
wife Lyndi seriously considered divorcing Bill, but then something happened to him after
“he attended a Campus Crusade for Christ conference . . . and became born again, convinced that he could have a direct, personal relationship with God, without the mediation of priests. The impact was immediate and profound . . . . He began praying over his children, fasting every Wednesday and Friday, and rising at 4 a.m. to read Scripture. He evangelized his friends, neighbors and total strangers” (Goodstein, 1997, section 13, p. 8). This experience eventually led McCartney to an organization in Ann Arbor called the Word of God (WOG). This group, 1,600 members strong, practiced shepherding and discipleship which required “total submission to a person called the head” (Bellant, 1995, p. 29). WOG 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 . . . members who questioned authority, or women who question their extreme submission to men, were subject to often traumatic exorcisms” (p. 29). The ideology of this ministry deeply influenced McCartney. He explains that “WOG leader Jim Berlucci is one of the two men who most influenced his life” (p. 29). These experiences in Michigan proved to be the glue that began to piece McCartney’s life back together and prepared him for his next revelation in Colorado.

As powerful as McCartney’s spiritual life was, his career was still the focal point of his energies. After his successful assistant coaching stay in Michigan, McCartney was hired as head football coach at the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1982. The program was struggling, but within eight years McCartney had taken the Buffaloes to the national championship. During the championship year (1990) the Promise Keepers began very quietly when McCartney and his friend Dr. Dave Wardell, an assistant professor of
physical education at the University of Colorado, were on their way to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes banquet in Pueblo, Colorado (Abraham, 1997). At one point in the trip McCartney asked Wardell, "If money were not an issue and you could do anything you wanted with your life, what would you do" (p. 17)? Wardell’s answer was the desire to "work with men on a one-to-one basis, helping them to develop a strong relationship with God" (p. 17). Wardell had unknowingly reinforced McCartney’s own thoughts as he told his friend he had been entertaining a surprisingly similar dream for some time: "I envision men coming together in huge numbers... worshiping and celebrating their faith together. I long to see men openly proclaiming their love for Christ and their commitment to their families" (p. 17).

After this trip the two men began to share their dreams with other close friends and by the end of 1990, a group of 72 men, "agreed to meet to pray about mobilizing men around a spiritual focus rather than politics, sports, or career interests... each member... committed himself to pray for a spiritual stirring among men in America" (p. 17). This meeting marked the beginning of the Promise Keepers. What began as an innocent trip to an athletic banquet in Pueblo, Colorado inspired McCartney and Wardell to begin a grass roots effort to unite men around the nation. The culmination of these activities proved to be the second catalytic event in McCartney’s life.

In 1991, PK held its first rally of 4,200 men at the University of Colorado Coors Event Center. Two years later, 50,000 men filled Folsom Stadium to capacity to listen to Bill McCartney, the man who claimed to know the will of God. By 1996, over one million men attended 22 stadium rallies nationwide (PK Fact Sheet, 1997).
The growth of PK and the increased attendance at these rallies could not happen without a strong financial base. In 1996, the organization had an annual budget “in excess of $115 million and a permanent staff of more than 400, whose efforts are augmented by the work of tens of thousands of volunteers (many of whom are women)” (Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos, 1996, p. 12). PK’s 1996 tax return shows “$16,413,431 as gross sales of . . . inventory and a total revenue of $87,419,179. Savings and cash investments are shown at $8,309,138 and inventories it could sell at $4,187,354. A few of its leaders made salaries over $80,000. Its president received $132,512 plus benefits and expenses” (Swomley, 1997, p. 13).

This financial independence did not come quickly or easily. Initially, right-wing evangelist James Dobson poured money into Promise Keepers to keep it afloat until income from events and products could support its expansion. The Promise Keepers also received help from Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, Stephen Strang, publisher of New Man magazine, and Pat Robertson, “who has given PK and its prophetic significance steady exposure on the Christian Broadcasting Network” (p. 12). The tie between PK and these men strongly links the movement with the political right. This link has been a concern for PK critics from the beginning of its rise to national attention. The relationship with Dobson has been particularly troubling to many because of his anti-abortion and anti-gay Family Research Council that has created a Washington lobby “to the right of the Christian Coalition” (p. 14). Although PK staunchly claims it has no political agenda, the support from the conservative right and its political aims has not
damaged the Promise Keepers momentum. In fact, conservative support has provided the preliminary financial backing so crucial to getting Promise Keepers on its feet.

Rallies and Promises

Promise Keepers asks men to commit their lives to seven promises during its stadium rallies. The group maintains that living these promises will ensure a better life for any man who rigidly follows them. PK’s events also provide other benefits to men who attend. As Harvey (1996) explains:

Promise Keepers... provides men with the community they have not found in church or in the marketplace, and it also redefines masculinity to legitimize emotion, spirituality and the admission of uncertainty. Promise Keepers also gives men a place to let their hair down. There’s a real need for male relationships, and Promise Keepers allows men to admit their faults, admit their sins, admit their not knowing and find some support (p. 30).

Many attend PK conferences in search of answers about how a modern man should look, sound, act and feel. “Today most men hold much different attitudes toward male and female roles than their parents or grandparents did. Many no longer believe that specific roles are valid at all, yet a suspicion that something is out of whack continues to gnaw at them” (Abraham, 1997, p. 20). Further, conference figures report that 50 percent of the men who attend PK rallies claim their own fathers were largely absent when they grew up and “although 88 percent are married, 21 percent have been divorced; 84 percent are
white and 34 percent attend Baptist or Southern Baptist churches. The median age is 38" (Shapiro, 1995, p. 70).

Speakers at PK’s conferences proclaim that the most important thing that any man can do is to “establish a personal relationship with Christ. The opening speaker of every conference presents an evangelistic message which is followed by an invitation for men to come forward to the platform area to publicly commit their lives to Christ” (Higgins, 1997, p. 22). This commitment comes in the form of seven promises that members of the Promise Keepers are asked to make in order to live their lives in a “Godly manner.”

Books, Magazines and The Internet

Leaders of social movements constantly search for new ways to spread their message. Initially, simple public speeches are often sufficient enough to spread the movement’s doctrine to its followers. However, if a movement is successful and experiences considerable growth, public speeches need to be supplemented with another means of communication to accommodate a larger and larger membership. Promise Keepers has responded to this challenge by publishing many books with the help of Dobson’s Focus on the Family publishing company. Included in the list are: The Promise of a Promise Kept, The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs - What God Does When Men Pray, What Makes a Man?, Focusing Your Men's Ministry, The Promise Keepers New Testament, and The Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper (Spalding, 1996, p. 260). Each of these books is designed to provide answers and reinforce PK’s central tenets to any man who becomes involved with the movement. Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper
the cornerstone of the movement because this book explains exactly what the seven promises are and how to live them.

Promise 1: A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Promise 2: A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.

Promise 3: A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.

Promise 4: A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.

Promise 5: A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.

Promise 6: A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.

Promise 7: A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20).

According to Christianity Today (1995) this book spent more than a year near the top of the Christian bestseller list. PK members believe that all of these books are based on sound, fundamental principles from the Bible.
At a time when surveys indicate that up to forty-two percent of those who call
themselves evangelical Christians believe that there is no such thing as absolute
truth, Promise Keepers takes the stand that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant,
infallible Word of God . . . If we believe the Bible has errors, we place ourselves
above it, determining for ourselves what is and is not truth (PK pamphlet,

Additionally, PK publishes a bi-monthly magazine called *New Man*, “which
features advice on safe sex (it’s called marriage) and columns on fitness and finances”
(Woodward, 1994, p. 60). The overall rhetorical tone of *New Man*,
combines loving acceptance of men despite failures and weaknesses with
exhortations on how to do better with the help of prayer, Bible study and
Christian fellowship. Readers are encouraged to admit their shortcomings and
fears to family members and each other as signs of true Christian manliness, and
to express tenderness and accessibility to children, rather than stereotypical
male emotional remoteness and authoritarianism (Van Leeuwen, 1997, p. 237).

Promise Keepers has also taken its ideology into cyberspace by creating its own
website which receives about one million hits a month (Olsen, 1996). The web site
contains messages from McCartney, upcoming conference dates and registration
information, faith promoting testimonies and official statements on topics from
homosexuality to small group study: “With its Web site and an electronic mailing list of
20,000, Promise Keepers is one of the few targeted organizations with a strong presence
on the Internet. Fundamentalists on the Web attack it for being too ecumenical.
sites accuse it of having a sexist agenda" (Olsen, 1996, p. 104). Although not everyone likes PK's presence on the World Wide Web, Don Clarke, web site editor for PK is not too concerned with opposition: "We believe we're where we're at because of God" (p. 104).

Structure of PK

Promise Keepers has grown rapidly since 1990. This growth has necessitated a highly structured organization capable of handling increased membership, financial pressure and external criticism. PK is a not-for-profit organization. It is governed by a 17 member board of directors. The Chairman of the Board is Bishop Phillip H. Porter, the "Senior Pastor at All Nations Pentecostal Center in Aurora, Colorado, the Bishop of the COGIC Jurisdiction of Montana . . . and has been active for many years in civil rights organizations" (PK Fact Sheet, 1997, p. 3).

The organization operates under the daily direction of its founder Bill McCartney. Before 1994, McCartney had only worked part time for the organization he had helped create. Shortly after stepping down as the head coach at the University of Colorado, McCartney joined the Promise Keepers in a full-time capacity in July 1995. In 1996, his role as founder evolved into that of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (Abraham, 1997). His new role includes the responsibility for establishing PK's direction and morale, something that he had done part time until his retirement from coaching.

Randy Phillips is the President of the Promise Keepers, a position he has held since PK's founding in 1990. Phillips was a pastor and associate pastor for fifteen years.
He had also "operated a Christian bookstore, a radio ministry and he served as Marketing and Operations Vice President for a Christian record company" (PK Biography, 1997, p. 1). Phillips also works closely with recently appointed Chief Operating Officer Thomas Fortson.

This multi-million dollar Christian crusade is headquartered in Denver, Colorado. Currently, PK employs a full-time staff over 400 people who are pre-dominantly white: "30 percent are minorities: 16 percent black, 13 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Native American. Less than 1 percent are Asian" (Olsen, 1997, p. 67). These numbers are one-sided for a group that claims to be free of racial bias. In response to charges of racial inequality, Promise Keepers has recently added a new reconciliation division “appointing a national strategic manager for each major racial group in an effort to attract a more diverse constituency” (p. 67). Promise Keepers operates locally through “36 regional offices serving all 50 states. Promise Keepers also operates independently in Australia, New Zealand and Canada” (PK Fact Sheet, 1997, p. 2).

This corporate structure has helped Promise Keepers manage the growing challenges of the movement, but the real key to its success comes from the method it uses to organize the “congregation.” After an individual attends a PK rally, he “designates a faith partner with whom he can share his deepest fears and secret sins on a daily basis. The purpose is to make each man accountable to another for keeping his promises” (Woodward, 1994, p. 61). These faith partnerships are joined together with one or two other partnerships into small groups that meet on a weekly basis as a Christian support group: “Each group is led by a key man chosen by the national organization. One of the
seven promises of a Promise Keeper requires active participation in a small group of other men who monitor all aspects of each other's behavior, including their sexual relations, family life, business practices and financial affairs. The key men report to ambassadors who, in turn, report to headquarters” (Swomley, 1997, p. 9). During each big rally, attendees are “invited to take a nine-hour leadership seminar. The graduates---ambassadors tapped by Promise Keepers and key men nominated by local pastors---then work at establishing men’s ministries and small discussion groups among churches in their area” (Van Biema, 1995, p. 63). These key men are selected at the stadium conferences and organized into two different levels.

Key man level one is more or less discussing the characteristics of a man, and why a man does things, and why he’s different than women, and why his feelings are certain ways versus why women feel certain ways. We talk about what the Promise Keepers vision is and goals, and how to discuss these items with other men in his church. . . key man level two training is actually showing and teaching men how to start a men’s ministry and small group (p. 9). This grass roots level management appears to be the foundation for the past and future success of the movement: “Ultimately, PK wants to have a key man in each of the nation’s 400,000 churches, using the military ideas of discipline and male bonding in small groups. The goal [says Bill McCartney] is to go into every church whether they like us or not” (p. 9).
The Vineyard Church

McCartney’s relationship with the charismatic Word of God fellowship in Michigan was the pre-cursor to his involvement with a similarly evangelical group in Colorado called the Vineyard Church. Both groups are examples of what some scholars are calling “new paradigm churches,” noting that their chapels are “typically devoid of religious ornamentation . . . pastors and congregants alike favor informal attire . . . music is contemporary (often electric guitars and pop-style praise choruses in place of organs and hymnals) . . . sermons center on Bible teaching, and . . . some degree of openness exists to such gifts of the Spirit as speaking in tongues” (R. Jensen, personal communication, 1998, p. 1).

Additionally, the Vineyard Church allows members to be “open about their hurts and also feel accepted, strongly encouraged to find a personal relationship with God through prayer and Bible study, and are made to feel free of institutional religion, especially denominational hierarchies” (R. Jensen, personal communication, 1998, p. 2). The Vineyard Church and its pastor James Ryle have strongly influenced McCartney, and consequently the Promise Keepers, through its Christian fundamentalist mind set: “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 or Satan’s” (Bellant, 1995a, p. 82). This “polarization” approach is a consistent theme that is easily identifiable in the rhetoric of the Promise Keepers. For example, in 1994, Ryle spoke at a secret Colorado conclave to plan anti-gay
and lesbian electoral strategies. He pointed out that “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” (Bellant, 1995, p. 83). Calling the practice of homosexuality a crisis clearly implies a division between serving God and serving the Devil which polarizes people into a specific group and it oversimplifies the argument on this issue.

Ryle has been a spiritual counselor and long time friend of McCartney since the coach’s arrival at the University of Colorado. Ryle has also influenced the direction of the Promise Keepers, at least from a distance. Ryle regards PK as the “fulfillment of the Bible’s prophecy of a great force that will destroy sinners and infidels in the period preceding Armageddon” (Conason, Ross and Cokorinos, 1996, p. 18). Some key Vineyard characteristics that mark PK as well include: “Suspicion of large, bureaucratic institutions. Passionate openness to current activity of the Holy Spirit. An experiential accent on spiritual transformation of individuals. A tactical, rather than strategic, approach to an organization’s growth and development.” (Maxwell, 1997, available at http://www1.christianity.net/ct/TTD/TTD062.html).

The Strength of a Leader

The epithet that “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link” can be analogous to the leader of a social movement. No matter how powerful the movement’s cause may be, if the establishment can sufficiently malign the character of a movement’s leader the movement will ultimately splinter and die before it has gained a large enough base of
committed supporters, this tactic is called “suppression” (Bower, Ochs and Jensen, 1993).
The establishment recognizes the crucial role that a movement’s leader plays: “In some cases, the leader is so important that he or she becomes a personification of that movement . . . Eliminate the leaders and you eliminate the movement” (p. 54). The opponents of the Promise Keepers have attempted to describe McCartney in ways that would compromise his integrity and deal PK a fatal blow.

One of the earliest attempts to destroy McCartney’s personal life came in the form of criticism for his political involvement: “In 1991, McCartney joined the advisory board of Colorado for Family Values, a statewide coalition of right-wing religious groups devoted to educating Coloradans about the gay lifestyle and opposed to civil rights statutes protecting gays” (Conason, Ross and Cokorinos, 1996, p. 14). This open stance on the issue of homosexuality reached its climax in 1992 during the debate over Amendment 2, a state ballot question aimed at blocking civil rights guarantees for gays and lesbians in the state of Colorado. After McCartney authorized the amendment’s sponsor, Colorado for Family Values, to use his name and affiliation on its fund-raising letters, the university received complaints about this apparent violation of policy. The coach agreed to ask the anti-gay rights crusaders to drop his name from their printed materials and called a news conference to make the announcement. There McCartney proceeded to urge Coloradans to support Amendment 2 and termed homosexuality an abomination before almighty God (Wagenheim, 1996, p. 75).

Although Amendment 2 was overturned by the Supreme Court, McCartney received
severe attacks for his views, but these attempts did not appear to damage his reputation or affect Promise Keepers' growth.

Further evidence of the criticism that McCartney received from the establishment arose after his past infidelity became public knowledge. On January 1, 1993, prior to the Fiesta Bowl game in Arizona, McCartney confessed to his wife, Lyndi, that he had committed adultery 20 years earlier. Lyndi was shocked at the news as McCartney recalls, “to her... it was like it happened last night. It ain't no 20 years ago” (Goodstein, 1997, section 13, p. 8).

Lyndi’s grief became more pronounced during the duration of 1993 and she plunged into a state of deep despair. The irony of the situation is the fact that while McCartney was out building a movement whose central tenet is that men should treasure and serve their wives and families, his own wife now says she was suffering through the most precarious days of a 35-year marriage. McCartney described what happened:

She spent nearly a year cloistered in her room refusing phone calls and visits, reading nearly 100 self-help books and hiding the fact that she could not keep down what little food she ate. She lost 80 pounds. I thought she was just exercising discipline. I saw her losing weight, but I didn’t see it as a bad thing. You know how ladies are, concerned about the pounds. I saw that she was losing weight, and I was proud of her (Goodstein, 1997, p. 8).

Many people were shocked, even disgusted with McCartney, the man who was supposed to be showing other men the formula for putting their own shambled lives back together. Lyndi recounts, “he was the same as a plumber... A plumber never fixes anything at
home. He's always out fixing everybody else’s plumbing” (p. 8). Looking back on these events, McCartney does not deny his apparent hypocrisy, but attempts to offer his problems up as an example to demonstrate the power of the Promise Keepers: “As a husband and a father, I wasn’t measuring up even as Promise Keepers had already started, but it was those Promise Keeper conferences that were convicting me. As these guys would get up and speak about these things, I would weep and I realized that I was exposed. I was not doing the things that we were asking me to do” (From the Today Show, November 19, 1997). McCartney now says with a perceived clear conscious that “God will even use a guy like me, because God forgives” (From the Today Show, November 19, 1997).

The PK Benefits Package

Although men become involved with the Promise Keepers for a variety of reasons, they attend stadium conferences by the thousands to secure a clear set of principles and practices that will help them deal with their pain and anxiety in effective ways.

A man who is secure in his position as a man has no need for alcohol, has no need to destroy his own body or other men’s bodies through violence, has no need to resort to sexual promiscuity to prove himself. The sense of relief at being given permission---by thousands of other men, in the masculine environs of a football stadium---to relax one’s masculine posturing with one’s self and with other men
appears to be a great draw for men who attend Promise Keepers events (Messner, 1997, p. 34).

The benefits of PK conferences have also provided men with the notion of agency, the ability to make choices. As one attendee stated, "[PK has allowed me] to make the time to develop my relationship with God and with my wife and kids . . . Other men who are in the same boat provide [the encouragement] to do what I should be doing" (Harvey, 1996, p. 35).

One of the most prominent ideas that PK supporters learn at rallies is the concept that "current social problems are caused by a lack of appropriate male leadership" (Beal, 1997, p. 274). This lack of leadership has caused "the breakdown of the traditional family. This assumed foundational problem has led to high school drop outs, a soaring crime rate, racism, divorce, homosexuality, and abortion" (p. 276). The answer to these problems is simple, turn your life to Christ. The idea to base your life on Christ (which means obeying the seven promises) is a traditional notion, but PK's conceptualization of Jesus is different from other religions:

Some "sissified" paintings of Jesus come nowhere near showing the real character of Him who was both Son of Man and Son of God. Jesus was a fearless leader, defeating Satan, casting out demons, commanding nature, rebuking hypocrites . . . God wants to reproduce this manhood in all men . . . . Since to be like Jesus—Christlike—requires a certain ruthlessness, manhood does also (Messner, 1997, p. 25-26).

This description of Jesus encourages men to express their praise and adoration of God.
verbally, a type of “enthusiastic corporate worship,” like something you might find at a football game. “After attending a Promise Keepers conference, many men are no longer content to sing songs about God; they want to sing to God in praise and worship” (Abraham, 1997, p. 41). PK hopes its rallies will convince men that actively worshipping God is synonymous with masculinity: “Our goal . . . is to bring men together in a catalytic event and send them back to their church and their tradition to become active in men’s ministry there. We are churchmen, here to build the church” (Schmidt, 1994, p. 806). One man remarked that PK does an “excellent job of targeting men’s moral failings in their marriages, and I find the events to be instructive and encouraging concerning biblical principles which can help me love my wife as she deserves to be loved . . . my wife is thoroughly supportive of my attendance at PK events” (T. Kidd, personal communication, November 14, 1997). Other wives of Promise Keepers feel that their men are definitely coming home vastly improved, not perfect, but “their husbands’ affiliation with Promise Keepers has made them more democratic and even humbler partners than they were before. I’ve been reading about all these women protesting about Promise Keepers, but they must be women whose husbands aren’t in it” (Jones, 1997, p. 8).

The final benefit that the PK movement brings to followers lives is the idea that they are “unique and irreplaceable. That message speaks to the best instincts within . . . and offers reassurance, in contrast to the past 30 years, when what they’ve been told is that they’re really not necessary” (Cose, 1997, p. 31). After considering the impact that PK is having in the lives of men around the country, the next step is to analyze the
rhetorical tactics that have led to PK's success. The critic should remember the words of
McCarty, "Our best days are still before us, men! Almighty God intends to do far more
with us than any of us have yet imagined" (From the Field, p. 2 available
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Social movement research by communication scholars has a rich history that can be traced to a seminal essay written by Leland Griffin (1952), called "The Rhetoric of Historic Movements." Griffin points out that a study of an historic movement is really a study of persuasive discourse. Historic movements occur when people become dissatisfied with their environment, desire change, and act on that desire. The methods that people use to enact this change are persuasive and studying their impact is precisely what communication scholars should do. Griffin states, "as students of persuasion, interested not so much in the accomplished change of opinion as in the attempt to effectuate change, we should find the rhetorical structure of the lost cause as meaningful as that of the cause victorious" (p. 347).

According to Griffin, the major thrust of any social movement study is to isolate the rhetorical movement within the context of the historical movement:

the rhetorical movement is the focus of his study. It is to be isolated, analyzed, evaluated and described, so that he [the critic] can say, for the particular historical movement which he investigates: this was the pattern of public discussion, the
configuration of discourse, the physiognomy of persuasion, peculiar to the
movement (p. 347).

After the critic understands the importance of the rhetorical and historical contexts, the
critic must then consider how much of the movement should be studied. Griffin (1952)
argues that the process should be brief, something that a single scholar can do and which
can encompass the movement “with scholarly accuracy and completeness” (p. 348).

The final critical step that Griffin advises the critic to take involves the actual
analysis of the discourse. At this point, the critic should judge the effectiveness of the
discourse, “individual as well as collective acts of utterance, in terms of the ends
projected by the speakers and writers” (p. 350). Griffin also sets forth three
developmental phases that historic movements evolve through: the period of inception,
when the public becomes aware of a problem or a need for change that results in
sufficient discourse to initiate a movement; the period of rhetorical crisis, when “one of
the opposing groups of rhetoricians ... succeeds in irrevocably disturbing that balance
between the groups which had existed in the mind of the collective audience” (p. 348);
and the period of consummation, when the cause is abandoned either because the
movement has achieved its goals or because no hope of success exists.

Simons (1970) extends Griffin’s ideas by analyzing the rhetorical dilemmas faced
by leaders of social movements. Simons argues that “the primary rhetorical test of the
leader—and, indirectly, of the strategies he employs—is his capacity to fulfill the
requirements of his movement by resolving or reducing rhetorical problems” (p. 2-3). A
leader’s problems include gaining and maintaining members, adoption of the movement’s
message by society and reacting strategically to external resistance. Simons provides a clear formula for overcoming these problems: “the leader wins and maintains adherents by saying to them what they cannot say to others or even to themselves. A major rhetorical process, then, consists of legitimizing privately-held feelings by providing social support and rationalization for those feelings” (p. 6). The Promise Keepers use of large stadium rallies is an example of the way that movements attempt to legitimate private feelings of confusion and inadequacy about the roles that men are supposed to play. Isolating men from women and putting them in the traditionally male environment of a football stadium is a strategy that McCartney uses to provide emotional support by letting men know they are not alone. Additionally as McEdwards (1968) observes, the agitator [McCartney] knows that his success depends upon the emotional and intellectual involvement of the full electorate. To this end he uses the meetings of his group or his friends primarily as a convenient and free soapbox from which to prod the larger audience of the general public. He welcomes reporters to his meetings to insure that his words do go farther than just the back of the hall, and he eagerly accepts interviews (p. 8).

Through the agitative acts of large public meetings, the movement hopes to force the establishment to react to its demands. Often the social movement’s leader believes “that appropriate institutions will act if the movement can make institutional leaders and followers aware of the urgent problem and its solution” (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994, p. 73).

Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) argue that movements need to demonstrate that
they are a serious threat to the establishment's way of life in order to force the
establishment into a reactive posture, which places the movement in control of future
decisions. The agitator's threats produce a "dialectical tension growing out of moral
conflict and provokes a clash between the social movement and the threatened
establishment. The struggle between institutional and uninstitutional forces becomes a
true moral battle for power and for the legitimate right to define the true order" (p. 12).

Additionally, Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) refine Griffin's discussion of the
three phases of a movement's development into five stages: Genesis, Social Unrest,
Enthusiastic Mobilization, Maintenance, and Termination. The "Genesis" stage begins
during relatively quiet times when the public has little awareness of the issue that the
movement will address. During this stage, individuals from scattered backgrounds
perceive an "imperfection" in the existing order and begin to become restless with the
need for a change. The Genesis stage is also a time when prophets "produce essays,
editorials, songs, poems, pamphlets, books and lectures designed to transform perceptions
of reality (past, present and future) and society (self and others). They define and
visualize" (p. 72). This stage may last for months, years or decades, but eventually the
aims of the movement begin to flower into public notice.

At this point the movement needs a triggering event to propel the unorganized,
almost unknown movement from the "Genesis" stage to the "Social Unrest" stage.
Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) explain that a triggering event is a specific incident
that provides a focal point for scattered individuals to express their dissatisfaction. These
events can include a court decision, an accident, a harsh statement by an institutional agent, military action or a movement-oriented book on the best seller list.

During this stage, more people express frustration in an attempt to resolve the perceived problem, while the movement begins to put together more concrete plans for the future like issuing an official manifesto which establishes the “devils, scapegoats, and faulty principles that have caused and sustained the exigence, and to prescribe the solution and the gods, principles, and procedures that will bring it about” (p. 75). The movement attempts to work through the existing channels of society to change norms, values or even laws. Also, the mass media begin to take notice of the movement and share the establishment’s efforts to trivialize the movement. This pressure from the establishment forces the movement to organize and causes the leader to assume the role of agitator as opposed to the single role of prophet or intellectual.

Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) contend that the movement’s desired changes usually do not happen and then the frustration with using established channels escalates to the point when the “converted see the social movement as the only way to bring about urgently needed change and believe firmly that the movement’s time has come” (p. 77).

At this point the movement enters the “Enthusiastic Mobilization” stage. Optimism is rampant and movement members become more tightly knit together about the cause. The leader plays on this excitement and the movement’s membership rapidly increases as the agitators demand more coverage by the media. “Leaders . . . may become martyrs for the cause by suffering physical injury, imprisonment, banishment or death. They not only accept but may readily seek suffering because the cause has become the
true believer's reason for being" (p. 79). These times prove to be another milestone for the movement, because if "the converted followers" do not see a significant change in society they become disillusioned. On the other hand, if part of the movement's demands are recognized, the movement can splinter while the leaders search for a new focal point.

If the social movement can survive the successes and failures of the "Enthusiastic Mobilization" stage, the movement then faces the new challenges of the "Maintenance" stage. In this stage, the movement becomes keenly aware of the two directions it may go: one toward ultimate victory and the other to oblivion. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) believe that the odds of success are against the movement because some of the spontaneity and excitement of earlier times becomes "unacceptable in the maintenance stage because rigid adherence to organization is the norm" (p. 82). The movement continues its efforts to change the perception of reality in its favor, but the primary persuasive function at this stage is to sustain the social movement: "Both membership and commitment decline during the maintenance stage, so leaders must recruit new members and reinforce belief in the movement's ideology and potential for ultimate rather than immediate success" (p. 81). These sustaining efforts become increasingly difficult because leaders spend less time in direct contact with members. They primarily communicate through media outlets (i.e. newsletters, videos, and the Internet) and much of their time is consumed by the demanding call to raise funds to support the movement. Lack of visibility is a large concern for the movement because it is no longer deemed "newsworthy" since large rallies or demonstrations are few and far between. The
movement hopes to find a new triggering event to excite the members, but most of the rhetoric is internal, directed toward maintenance functions.

Failure to create a new triggering event will lead to the final stage of "Termination." Most social movements do not totally disband, but often break into smaller groups that are often co-opted into external organizations. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) claim that one reason for this termination is "the social movement's ideology may be so broad or idealistic, such as the end of all prejudice in society, that all of its tasks are rarely fulfilled" (p. 83). Other reasons for a movement's failure come when it "loses faith in society's capacity for reform . . . or the new lifestyle becomes boring and meaningless as years pass" (p. 84). If a social movement does succeed, its ideology is embraced by society as a whole and the new order called for by the social movement becomes the establishment.

To augment Stewart, Smith and Denton's stages of evolution in the life cycle of a social movement, this study uses the ideas in The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control by Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen (1993). These authors also address a movement's evolution. However they focus more on a movement's rhetorical strategies by dividing agitative rhetoric into nine different categories: petition, promulgation, solidification, polarization, nonviolent resistance, escalation/confrontation and Gandhi and guerrilla.

The strategy of "petition" involves tactics like "selection of motive appeals, selection of target audiences, selection of types and sources of evidence and selection of language" (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993, p. 20). At this point, the movement is trying to operate within the parameters of the establishment by using normal channels to voice
its dissatisfaction with some aspect of the present system. Bowers, Ochs and Jensen (1993) argue that unless a social movement uses this strategy, the establishment can easily de-legitimize the agitators by exposing them as "irresponsible firebrands who reject normal decision-making processes in favor of disturbances and disruption" (p. 20).

The next stage utilizes the strategy of "promulgation." At this stage, the agitators attempt to recruit members and gain the public's acceptance by exploiting the mass media. Bowers, Ochs and Jensen claim that "the mass media are the most effective means of reaching a wide spectrum of potential converts . . ." (p. 21). Agitators need to become "newsworthy", so they try to stage events that may involve conflict. Consequently, when the mass media cover these events, they must "furnish some rationale for the story and the rationale may at least partially express the agitator's ideology . . . they [the mass media] also expose the agitating message to the public" (p. 21).

"Solidification," the next strategy, is primarily concerned with uniting the movement's followers. This unification can come through the use of plays, songs, slogans, consciousness-raising groups and in-group publications (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993). Some of these tactics also serve an external function. For example, a slogan is designed to be simple and repeatable. Often slogans are chanted and this "chanting may provide catharsis by releasing pent up emotion while at the same time building the group's solidarity" (p. 28).

Another way of uniting members is through strategy of "polarization." Bowers, Ochs and Jensen (1993) explain that polarization "assumes that any individual who has
not committed to the agitation supports the establishment” (p. 34). Ultimately individuals are forced to make a choice between the agitators and the establishment because the agitators know that they need committed members to carry the movement forward.

Following the strategy of “polarization” the movement may turn to “nonviolent resistance.” Nonviolence finds agitators in a position “where they are violating laws they consider to be unjust and destructive of human dignity (sometimes customs rather than laws are violated)” (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993, p. 37). Nonviolent resistance can be represented in tactics like sit-ins, rent strikes, boycotts, picket lines or blocking entrances to buildings. These tactics often force the establishment to respond, sometimes violently, which may energize activists and garner external sympathy toward the movement.

An additional strategy that a social movement may use after polarizing its members is called “escalation/confrontation”. This strategy “consists of a series of tactics, each of which is designed to escalate the tension until establishment representatives finally resort to violent suppression” (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993, p. 42). When the establishment reacts in this way, it runs the risk of exposing its inadequacies and further justifying the movement’s ideology.

The final strategy that Bowers, Ochs and Jensen discuss is that of “Gandhi and guerrilla.” This strategy confronts the establishment with a large group of agitators using nonviolent resistance (Gandhi) or a large group of agitators using violent resistance who are focused on the physical destruction of the establishment (guerrilla). This strategy “assumes that the activities of each group will contribute to the achievement of common goals” (p. 43).
Although each phase in the life cycle of a social movement is challenging, the movement’s major rhetorical dilemma is motivating people to take action. Many people verbalize their intentions to get involved, but they simply do not follow through with a complimentary performance. “These factors are compounded in the case of religious conservatives whose faith teaches a fatalism and a belief that problems of the earth are of little concern to the spiritually fulfilled” (Espin, 1997, p. 39-40). In other words, a movement must show people how adopting its goals will benefit the lives of an otherwise content conservative population. Although it is difficult to move people off of this comfort plateau, there are several rhetorical strategies which conservative social movements have used successfully. Not only do these strategies point out the most effective methods, but studying them adds to understanding about conservative movements. This understanding also allows critics to piece together the larger picture of conservative rhetoric.

As Medhurst (1985) explains, the first task in studying conservative rhetoric is, “to seek to understand conservatism as a distinct political philosophy replete with a history, leading ideas, and representative spokespersons. Critics need to study the evolution of conservative ideas and the social forces and historical circumstances that gave rise to their adoption” (p. 107). Although critics may have a tendency to think of social movements as radical, illegitimate groups operating outside the normal communicative channels of society, there are others who see radicals touting the shield of conservatism to be equally as fanatical. These conservative radicals are worthy of study and provide insight into social movement theory building and analysis.
Duffy (1984) provides one example of how a critic can study conservative discourse in his article on scapegoating. Conservatives often use this strategy to shift the blame for society's problems to any person or group that has a liberal agenda. Duffy claims that scapegoating is now used extensively by members of the "religious right": "The removal of prayer from the public schools and the teaching of such subjects as sex education, evolution, and values clarification demonstrate, according to the new religious right, the purposeful deChristianization of the public schools" (p. 351). So who is the scapegoat in this case? The answer is simple: anyone who supports secular humanism, or the "profoundly influential educational movement of the Renaissance" (p. 342).

Other conservative scholars have looked at the issue of communism. Baskerville (1963) points out that conservatives are "opposed to one-worldism, and all manifestations thereof" (p. 199). To support his ideas, he focuses on the work of three popular evangelists of the time to fuel the distrust, even hatred of communism. For example, Dr. Billy James Hargis declares, "No man can be a Communist, a Socialist, or a Kennedy liberal, and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ" (p. 201). A simple dichotomy of "us" versus "them" is established, making the congregations of conservative America more prone to evaluate people and policies. This study can be quite revealing when examining conservative discourse because it suggests a pattern. However, now that "communism" is over, is there still a use for this polarization rhetoric? Could it be that communism is also metaphoric and the other ills that conservatives see are considered equally horrific?

Another approach that a critic may consider is focusing on the internal discourse leaders of conservative movements use to communicate with their members. Roderic

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Hart (1971) examines the concept of doctrine: "Most doctrines are inherently bodies of answers—they define trouble and good, prescribe courses of action, indicate ways out of trouble, explain good options" (p. 252). Hart asserts that speaker and audience create meaning together. All the speaker can do is encourage the adoption of particular ideas, the audience has to fill in the gaps of reasoning. "Apparently knowing that their listeners already 'have the answers' . . . doctrinal speakers elaborate anxieties and only rarely discuss solutions" (p. 252). These doctrinal speakers are often the opinion leaders who grant support to the overall cause of conservative rhetoric.

Still a different approach to studying the conservative movement comes from Craig Allen Smith (1984) who focuses on the discourse of the John Birch Society. The uniqueness of Smith's approach is the use of systems theories to analyze conservative rhetoric. According to Smith, there is the open system, which interacts with the environment (organic model) and the closed system which stays confined (mechanic model). Smith likes the open model because it exposes the members to persuasive attempts. These attempts are not necessarily contrary to the prominent ideology of the system. In fact persuasion can serve as a source of glue:

- Birchers see themselves as true patriots (as opposed to posturing patriots), who are disciplined and hard-working (their educational attainments and income would seem to bear this out), steadfast and uncompromising on matters of principle, and well-informed. They seem to have a strong sense of efficacy (perhaps derived from their family background, their educational attainments, or their professional successes) reflected in their conviction that a small group of
committed Birchers can rescue America from dominance of the cruel, all-powerful Communists (p. 168).

Obviously, the John Birch Society is only a small part of conservative rhetoric and using a systems theory method is not the only way to study these movements, but Smith's ideas add to the overall knowledge about conservative discourse.

The previous examples do not constitute a complete list of studies of conservative discourse but, as Medhurst asserts, these studies demonstrate the evolution of conservative ideas and help the critic isolate the most effective rhetorical strategies. In terms of this study, Promise Keepers is similar to other studies about conservative rhetoric. This study adds to the overall understanding of the conservative movement by providing a historical circumstance and a discussion of the evolution of conservative ideas over time. Analyzing PK's evolution is significant because Promise Keepers has continued to grow from 72 men in 1990 to over a million in the short span of seven years. There are few social movements that could rival this type of growth and success.

Finally, one of the most important goals in this type of analysis is to make a contribution to the communication discipline's overall understanding of the role and impact of rhetoric (Foss, 1989). This goal is closely related to the forward thinking essay that Griffin (1952) first conceptualized and it does have a direct link to a rhetorical analysis of the Promise Keepers. "By seeing numbers of men in an act and atmosphere of discourse, we may indeed produce fresh transcripts of particular moments of the past. We may come closer to discovering the degree of validity in our fundamental assumption:"
that rhetoric has had and does have a vital function as a shaping agent in human affairs” (p. 352).

To determine the role of rhetoric, this study will explain how the Promise Keepers organization has evolved in terms of the "stages model" outlined by Stewart, Smith and Denton. Second, this study will illustrate how the movement's leadership has addressed the rhetorical problems associated with each stage as well as isolating the rhetorical strategies (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen) that have contributed to the movement's success of advancing its conservative agenda.

This study examines the rhetoric of the movement exemplified by the essays compiled in the Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, as well as responses to the establishment's criticism of these promises. A comparison of PK's change in focus on such issues as male dominance, homosexuality and racial reconciliation will be analyzed to show the transformation of the rhetorical strategies that have helped the movement in its life cycle. This study will argue that the Promise Keepers are currently in the maintenance stage and have purposely broadened the scope of their rhetoric to appeal to a larger audience in an effort to rekindle the excitement of the movement by refocusing the members on the potential of PK in accordance with its plans to go worldwide by the year 2000. An examination of this expanded rhetoric will show how Promise Keepers has manipulated its ideas both proactively (according to the leadership's anticipation) and reactively (in response to criticism by the establishment) in order to continue the forward momentum of the movement.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF PK’S RHETORIC

“Promise Keepers was reaching out to men and women all over the country and I was like . . . I don’t like you, because you are another thief in my life” (Lyndi McCartney, 1997, 20/20 Interview).

“A Promise Keepers’ bumper sticker says it all: If You Want to Go to Heaven, Take a Right and Go Straight” (Messner, 1997, p. 31).

Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) argue that “the men’s movement of the 1990s appears to be in the genesis stage awaiting some event, person or organization to propel it into the next stage” (p. 74). By adding the phrase “of the 1990s,” these authors imply that there have been other incarnations of the men’s movement in the United States. How then can a critic distinguish the Promise Keepers from previous men’s movements? Van Leeuwen (1997) claims that there are at least two fundamental differences between prior men’s movements (like Bly’s mythopoetic following) and Promise Keepers. First, PK sends a strong evangelical message about the importance of personal repentance and conversion: “individual men . . . must confess complicitly and ask other family members for forgiveness—including forgiveness from their own fathers for harboring resentment and bitterness against them for their earlier absence” (p. 241).

Van Leeuwen (1997) believes that the second distinction for PK is its use of the feminist critique of stereotypical masculinity. PK has recast this stereotype into the
biblical mold of true manhood exemplified by Jesus Christ. This reassigning serves the valuable purpose of rejecting the profile of the friendless American male considered to be self-reliant, unfeeling, competitive, and distant from both women and men. Instead PK tells men "to practice the biblical virtues of encouragement, forgiveness, mutual confession, and mutual aid. Even confrontation with other men, while admitted to be sometimes necessary, is to be practiced with a view to strengthening relationships rather than scoring points" (p. 241). According to Van Leeuwen, PK appears to have a lot in common with feminism. This parallel with feminism is illustrated by the way PK urges men to show their emotions, let go of their anger and reevaluate how they treat the women in their lives: "Men's fear of being seen as weak or unimportant—in effect, their fear of being equated with women—can become a terrible obstacle in all their relationships" and for the most part PK has recognized this fear and capitalized on it (p. 241).

This chapter will focus on the rhetorical strategies that Promise Keepers has used to create, expand and maintain a social movement. This study will begin by tracing the Promise Keepers through the evolutionary stages described by Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) in their discussion of the life cycle of social movements. Next, this chapter will discuss the seven promises of a promise keeper with a particular focus on the issues of male dominance, homosexuality and racial reconciliation. Finally, this chapter will examine the use of sports as a rhetorical tool.
The Genesis Stage

Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) contend that a social movement begins in a relatively quiet time period when the issues the movement will address are being virtually ignored by the public. The 1990s have arguably become a time of decreased belief in God, family and active church attendance: “In the Colonial era, many more citizens actually attended church than qualified for membership. Today, it appears many more Americans claim regular church attendance than actually show up for worship... according to a study... published in the December issue of American Sociological Review, half the people tell the truth” (D. K. Mikkelson, personal communication, December 1997, p. 1). During the genesis stage, restless individuals become aware of the perceived flaws in society and attempt to tell all who will listen about the dangers:

“Promise Keepers argues that men’s problems today result largely from departures from men’s natural roles” (Messner, 1997, p. 27). Promise Keepers believes that the changes in social structures, like the rise in single parent households headed by women and the increased societal acceptance of homosexuality, are some of the signs that pose a threat to the conservative religious ideology.

This study defines PK’s Genesis Stage as the period of time between 1990 and 1993. During this time, McCartney revealed his major concern about the state of the nation and attempted to justify the need for Promise Keepers: “I am convinced that the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization of the American male. When I say feminization, I am not talking about sexual preference. I’m trying to describe a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of ‘sissified’ men who abdicate
their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum" (Messner, 1997, p. 26). McCartney was filling the role of the prophet who, according to Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994), has the “ability to perceive the true nature of the urgent problem, its causes and its solution . . . . The legitimacy of decisions is judged by reference to ideology, not by ends achieved” (p. 98). McCartney’s rhetoric also contained a visionary quality because of his desire to spark a great awakening in men around the country: “Men touched by the spirit of God, will re-create society in the image of their faith: You’re going to see them move across the community unlike you’ve ever seen, and connect in ways in which they have not connected . . . . I see the churches coming together. And I see jobs coming out of it. I see the poor being fed . . . . ’cause God’s going deep into the hearts of these men” (Cose, 1997, p. 30). During this period of time McCartney’s rhetoric was the major thrust behind PK’s initial efforts as he attempted to get men to visualize how great the nation would be if Promise Keepers ideology could take root. This rhetoric aimed at “reasserting the masculinity back into men” appeared to be effective. “What rhetoric, itself, does is to define and interpret the significance of human activity for those engaged in the activity” (Andrews, 1980, p. 275). In the Genesis stage, PK showed a small but steady following at its stadium rallies reporting an attendance of 72 men in 1990, 4,200 men in 1991, 22,000 men in 1992 and 50,000 men in 1993 (PK Fact Sheet, 1997).

Social Unrest Stage

A social movement needs a triggering event to push it from the Genesis Stage into
the Social Unrest Stage (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994). The event that triggered the formation of the Promise Keepers into a focused organization can be identified by the 1993 men’s gathering that filled Folsom Stadium with 50,000 men. This display of commitment to the ideas that McCartney and his colleagues had been working on over the past three years had finally taken root. At the close of this conference, McCartney asked, “What would it be like if a stadium full of men in each state across the country began to take God at his word” (Abraham, 1997, p. 18)? In response to this query, 1,000 pastors from a wide variety of denominations met at the front of the stadium to recommit themselves as spiritual leaders, while the men in the stands “affirmed their appreciation of the pastors by cheering wildly, giving the pastors a prolonged standing ovation, and shouting in unison, we love you” (p. 18)! McCartney’s vision to fill other stadiums around the country appeared to be shared by those in attendance. This combination of widespread individuals who had previously been working on their own came together to voice their concerns and make plans to change society’s moral failings (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994).

Promise Keepers caused the media to take note of such a large assembly of men getting together to discuss their fears, their confusing roles as men, and their relationships with Jesus. This media coverage was particularly evident in Colorado, but because of McCartney’s reputation as a coach and the increasing interest in PK by men around the country, with rallies drawing over 275,000 men in 1994, the media picked up on the Promise Keepers. PK’s rhetoric made important distinctions about the expected roles of men and gave them the opportunity to talk about the issues away from their wives,
mothers and girlfriends. The distinctions that PK created helped confused men identify the specific roles husbands and fathers were supposed to play. These roles encouraged each man to "stand up and lead his family rather than sit back and be pushed or pulled around by society's politically correct images of what the family should be" (Abraham, 1997, p. 21).

Promise Keepers' success in the Social Unrest Stage can be traced to the parallels it shares with evangelical Christians. Evangelicals take the Bible in its original manuscript to be literally true and they believe that the Holy Spirit is active in believers and sparks the new birth of unbelievers. Also, evangelicals regard each human as a sinner who can be redeemed only through faith in Jesus Christ (Clatterbaugh, 1997). PK mirrors these ideas in its statement of faith. Consider PK's attitude toward the Bible: "We believe that the Bible is God's written revelation to man and it is verbally inspired, authoritative, and without error in the original manuscripts" (PK Statement of Faith, 1997, p. 1). Promise Keepers also relies heavily on the workings of God's Spirit: "We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, that He performs the miracle of new birth in an unbeliever and indwells believers, enabling them to live a godly life" (p. 3). Finally, PK reflects the evangelical view of Jesus' role in the lives of the its followers: "We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. Only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation which was made possible by his death and resurrection, can that alienation be removed" (p. 3).

Additionally, "evangelicals have blamed feminism for abortion, the rising divorce rate, the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases, low test scores, and a general
moral decline in the country” (Balmer, 1997, p. 8). PK’s rhetoric has been called anti-feminist because of its call for men to “take back power from women” (Rich, 1996, p. A21). PK also demonstrates the similarities to evangelicals with its ideological and financial link to organizations like the Christian Coalition which is pushing the religious-right’s agenda of “outlawing abortion, demonizing homosexuals and bringing prayer and the teaching of creationism to public schools” (p. A21).

No mention of PK’s success in this stage would be complete without addressing the impact of the movement’s leader: “What gives McCartney such influence is his image as a championship-winning football coach who has taken a very public stand about his faith and about being a good husband and father” (Gilbreath, 1995, p. 26).

During the Social Unrest Stage McCartney’s affair first came to the surface and he was criticized for the failings in his own home, including his daughter’s two children both born out of wedlock (from two different fathers) and a wife in the middle of a nervous breakdown over her husband’s actions. “Yet, McCartney’s failures—and his willingness to own up to them—give him a certain authenticity with PK men who recognize that God has always found great use for flawed, broken men whose hearts seek after Him than for sanctimonious do-gooders who lead seemingly perfect lives” (Mattox, 1995, p. 40). Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) support the “honest leader” analysis of McCartney: “There is no evidence . . . that the typical social movement leader lies, cheats, misuses facts and makes false accusations intentionally. Similarly, no evidence exists that leaders join the movement for personal gain and power” (p. 91). He appeared to have the organizational abilities to be a successful leader. “An organizer must also have a strong
ego but not egotism. Leaders must have a healthy belief in themselves and their abilities to achieve goals if they are to instill confidence and belief in others” (p. 94).

McCartney’s success as a college football coach demonstrated his ability to organize and instill confidence in others.

In terms of the movement, McCartney dramatized the evils of broken promises in marriage, business and the community which have all led to anger, resentment and violence (Abraham, 1997). He began to create important “we-they” distinctions which polarized the movement and gave the movement its identity by isolating “sissified men” and liberal ideas as the enemy to happiness. Bowers, Ochs and Jensen (1993) state that agitators traditionally focus their attack on one person and “the person chosen must be viewed by members of the dissenting group as being worthy of attack and must be vulnerable to attack” (p. 35). Although PK’s attack is broader than one person, it singles out men who have been poor husbands and fathers and plays upon their guilt.

At this point, the movement works in the establishment’s channels by asking men to join in support of its cause by attending rallies and turning their lives over to Jesus. Promise Keepers begins using the strategy of promulgation and attempts to exploit the mass media: “One of the main purposes of promulgation is to win public acceptance of the agitators’ ideology, their system of values and beliefs and their policies. This purpose cannot be fulfilled unless the activists can communicate their ideology to the public” (p. 21).
Enthusiastic Mobilization Stage

The Enthusiastic Mobilization Stage is flooded with true believers who are excited about the movement's potential, but become somewhat frustrated with the establishment's ability to enact these changes. These believers begin to embrace the movement as the only answer to the moral resurrection of society (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994). PK's early efforts in this stage were successful largely because of growing media attention between 1994 and 1997.

According to a Lexis-Nexis database search, PK's coverage increased dramatically by the last two quarters of 1994 with over 165 mentions during this time period (Print Mass Media Coverage of the Promise Keepers: The First Five Years, 1998). Part of this increased coverage can be credited to James Dobson's powerful radio-driven theocratic crusade which was a huge financial support for PK by providing a publishing outlet for PK texts. Dobson also provided a positive media endorsement for PK's texts after publication through his vast media network (Rich, 1996).

Also during 1994, major Christian Right leaders 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" (Bellant, 1995a, p. 84). This attempt to garner the support of the mass media is an absolutely essential function for the movement's survival. As Andrews (1980) notes, "any movement must deal somehow with social perceptions of reality by using rhetoric to alter, shape and extend the ways in which the world is seen by those living in it" (p. 279).
PK's conference attendance continued to soar and by the end of 1994 the movement had attracted 278,600 men to seven stadiums nationwide (PK Fact Sheet, 1997). Besides the radio and television coverage provided by Dobson and Robertson, 1994 was significant because Promise Keepers manifesto, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, was released. Not only did this book serve as a recruiting tool, but more importantly, it told men exactly what they needed to do to expand the movement. This book is a series of essays that details what each of the seven promises mean and how followers can apply these promises to their lives.

PK's followers purchase the book at conferences and are given instructions about the best way to study its contents:

> after each of the seven promises, [is] a chance for you to personally evaluate your life in light of what you've read. Then we encourage you to work through the book for at least eight weeks in a small group of men—three to five is an ideal number. This will give you a chance to talk about what you've read and to encourage and help one another to implement the commitments you make (Phillips in Janssen, 1994, p. 9).

This approach ensures that each member will become further indoctrinated into supporting the movement. Promise Keepers' rhetoric consistently emphasizes the strength that comes with this small group approach and it offers five tips for small group study: “(1) Be open: Ask God to show you the men for your group; (2) Be consistent: Meet every week, even if someone in the group can’t make it; (3) Be honest: Don't avoid tough questions; (4) Be intentional: Plan occasional get-aways for relationship building
times; (5) Be accountable: Ask each other for help in especially testing time” (Face 2 Face, 1997, p. 2 available at http://www2.promisekeepers.org/manual/news/november97/p4.htm). Ultimately, these small groups report back to PK headquarters which gives men a perception of accountability and a sense of belonging.

In addition to small group study, Promise Keepers encourages its members to form individual men's ministries in each church regardless of the denomination. This strategy is an attempt to solidify the group while continuing to add recruits to the movement. PK's rhetoric in this stage emphasizes the power of each person: “One man can make a difference. He can bring revival to his family. They can bring it to their church and community. As men begin encouraging godly growth in each other in the context of a men's ministry in their church, we'll see lives changed. We'll see promises kept. We'll see a nation changed” (PK News, 1997, p. 1). This inclusive approach is effective because it takes the adage “the best advertising is word of mouth” and applies this logic to recruiting since excited members naturally tell their friends about the life changing events they have had at PK rallies. The other strength of PK's strategy is noted by Hahn and Gonchar (1971) “extremists groups play upon people's desire for group acceptance through the either you're for us or against us gambit . . . it oversimplifies complex problems . . . its all-or-nothing approach cuts off communication among opponents” (p. 50).

Promise Keepers' rhetoric was propelling the movement forward by taking advantage of the rampant optimism of its followers. Evidence of PK's success is
displayed by the continued media coverage the movement received. Mentions of the organization in print media rose to well over 1,500 between the beginning of 1995 and the first quarter of 1996 (Print Mass Media Coverage of the Promise Keepers: The First Five Years, 1998). Also PK’s conference attendance snowballed to a record 727,342 men in 13 stadiums during 1995 and surged to 1.1 million men gathering in 22 stadiums around the country in 1996 (PK Fact Sheet, 1997). These rallies serve the practical function of spreading the message, but they are also symbolic. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) note how Gandhi went on sacred pilgrimages which allowed him to recruit followers and draw attention to his commitment to the cause. Similarly, McCartney’s stadium rallies and his use of football analogies to recruit new members by building on common ground with those people who are most sympathetic to the movement display McCartney’s commitment to the Promise Keepers.

For many the effects of these rallies are extremely significant. Consider the example of Roger Poirier who attended his first PK rally with 62,000 other men who wept and prayed beside him. Poirier said, “I just got on fire” (Harvey, 1996, p. 28). During the summer of 1995, Poirier took 400 more men to a tearful, exuberant rally in Detroit and now he is vice-president of the Promise Keepers Canada, the movement’s first venture abroad (Harvey, 1996). PK’s rhetoric was touching something inside men at these conferences that they had not been able to find on their own.

To help spread its ideology to more and more people, PK began to focus a segment of each conference on one isolated goal, to gather a million men in Washington to take a stand for Jesus. The rhetoric about this assembly in Washington began slowly,
but soon this idea became a dominant theme at PK conferences. PK speaker David Castro provides an example of the type of rhetoric that Promise Keepers used to persuade its members:

Tonight, we gotta make a decision . . . yes I'm gonna not only go to Washington . . . I'm gonna take a man that because of his . . . walk with Jesus has the authority to intercede and stand in the gap for the men of this nation . . . . . Our authority in Washington is only gonna be as good as our integrity between here and Washington . . . . We're going there to change the spiritual climate of this nation. The spiritual climate of this nation will be changed by Godly men, Godly men, men, men, men (Hetherly, 1997, p. 15).

The anticipated march on Washington gave the movement a focal point and convinced its followers to pray for men to attend.

The prayers of the movement seemingly were answered and PK's march on Washington became a reality on October 4, 1997. Nearly a million men were spread out from the Capitol well beyond the Washington Monument to demonstrate their conviction to change the spiritual climate of the nation (Cose, 1997). The impact on the movement was tremendous. Brian Mowers, a PK member from North Carolina, recounts:

From the time I left my driveway Friday night until the bus returned to the church parking lot Sunday morning, the presence of the Lord could be felt by every person in our 110 man group. Stand in the Gap [the official name of PK's March on Washington] was the most incredible, spiritual time of my life. I first broke into tears just walking on the mall Saturday morning when the sheer
number of believing men sort of hit me, as I gazed over the multitude and realized that Jesus Christ is alive and well in America, though maybe we forgot where to find him. Well I can tell you, He was in Washington, D.C. on October 4th, 1997. I felt Him. I saw Him. I prayed with Him. I held Him in my arms. I loved Him. I confessed to Him. I re-dedicated my life to him. And He loved me through countless thousands of men gathered in His name. Awesome (PK Net Testimony of the Week, November 1997, available at http://www.promisekeepers.org/)

The London Times places this event into a larger context. "More people gathered on Washington’s Mall than all those who attended the epic 1963 civil rights march" (p. 1). Although this demonstration was impressive and PK’s supporters were energized, not everyone was pleased with the outcome. Critics of PK believe that this demonstration was a not so subtle political message to show the country that Promise Keepers was a legitimate force with an extremely committed congregation. Critics believe that this particular congregation could be easily manipulated to serve a variety of agendas in the community and at the voting booth.

PK President Randy Phillips sees Stand in the Gap (SITG) in a completely different light. "We have not come to demonstrate our power to influence men. We have come to display our spiritual poverty that Almighty God might influence us" (Phillips’

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1 The London Times reports that 750,000 men attended the Stand in the Gap conference and The Chicago Tribune reports that at least a half million attended. Other figures state that the actual attendance was closer to one million and this rally is claimed to be larger than Louis Farrakan’s march on the capital in 1996.
speech at SITG, 1997, p. 1). Phillips recognizes the establishment’s criticism of the Promise Keepers on such issues as male dominance and the accusation that PK is trying to steal members from all faiths to support its para-church structure. “We have not come to exalt our gender as males. We have come to exalt the man Jesus Christ who is savior, who is Lord, and who is God. No woman should be threatened by this gathering” (p. 3).

Phillips goes on to point out that the United States is the place to celebrate religious freedom for all: “We have not come to impose our religious beliefs on others . . . We gather not to denigrate other faiths, but to affirm our belief and life message that salvation comes through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone” (p. 4).

It is probably too early to tell the true impact that PK’s Stand in the Gap rally will have on the country or for that matter the lasting impact the march will have on movement members.\(^2\) Phillips maintains that the success at SITG will not be determined by the size of the audience, or the eloquence of the speakers, rather by “your choice to yield to and receive the transforming power of God’s forgiveness and God’s love” (Phillips’ speech at SITG, 1997, p. 7). But scholars of American religion are “well aware of the movement behind the Promise Keepers and of its momentum . . . today it is changing the way Americans pray—and the way they respond to social issues” (Harkavy, 1997, p. 8).

Finally, at the close of the Stand in the Gap assembly McCartney attempted to harness the excitement and unity of his followers and channel that energy into PK’s two

\(^2\) "A Washington Post poll pegged the Stand in the Gap gathering as 80 percent white, 14 percent black and 2 percent Asian" (http://www1.christianity.net/ct/7TD/7TD062.html).
new historic initiatives. "First, he [McCartney] plans to take the PK organization and its trademark stadium events worldwide. Second, PK is calling for large gatherings of Christian men to assemble on the steps of every U.S. state Capitol on January 1, 2000, bearing witness that the giant of racism is dead in the church of Jesus Christ" (Maxwell, 1997, available at http://www1.christianity.net/ct/7TD/7TD062.html). McCartney also announced that 37 stadium gatherings will be held in North America over the next two years without charge. Nine of these events will be exclusively for pastors, both male and female (Maxwell, 1997, available at http://www1.christianity.net/ct/7TD/7TD062.html).

Promise Keepers and the Maintenance Stage

Entering into the "Maintenance Stage" is a crucial time for a social movement because no matter how much progress it has made, all of its goals have not been achieved. Consequently, movement members become frustrated with the thoughts of a prolonged struggle that may lead to disillusionment and eventual separation from the movement (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994). Social movements must alter perceptions of reality, create and sell courses of action and most importantly sustain the movement over time (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994). This sustaining process is what the Maintenance Stage is all about.

The day after Stand in the Gap, McCartney reiterated PK's expansive agenda on NBC's Meet the Press: "I believe God is showing us now that he wants us to go global. How that unfolds is anybody's guess" (Maxwell, 1997, http://www1.christianity.net/ct/7TD/7TD062.html). After the perceived success of PK's
million man march, McCartney appeared to realize the let down that would ultimately come after such a huge event. This forward thinking may in part account for PK's plans to go worldwide. McCartney hoped to "reinforce belief in the movement's ideology and potential for ultimate rather than immediate success" (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994, p. 81). This approach is an attempt to refocus the movement on a single issue or solution and the movement's rhetoric reflects this narrow focus.

During the Maintenance Stage, Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) argue that social movements struggle to be newsworthy to prevent the mass media from moving on to cover more exciting events, because lack of media coverage can be very detrimental to the cohesiveness of the movement. After the Promise Keepers March on Washington, the mass media continued to cover the movement. McCartney and his wife were featured on an interview on National Public Radio in late November where he discussed PK's goals for the year 2000. McCartney also reinforced the notion that PK does not have a political agenda. Other interviews about the Promise Keepers included an appearance on NBC's The Today Show (November 19, 1997) and a feature segment on 20/20 (November 13, 1997). These interviews provided a brief history of PK and focused to some extent on McCartney's adulterous past. However, at this stage, the movement is more concerned with the quantity of the coverage, rather than its quality. McCartney understands that PK needs more members and his efforts in the media will go a long way toward this goal.

When this initial spurt of mass media coverage dies, the movement returns to more quiet times and attempts to plan another catalytic event that will help achieve the same excitement experienced during the events of the Enthusiastic Mobilization Stage.
Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) point out that the movement’s persuasion once again “emanates from the pen and printer and from legislative, judicial, conference, convention and lecture halls. It is time to hold on to what has been gained and to consolidate movement organization for the duration” (p. 81). McCartney addresses the question that many followers were asking, where do we go after Stand in the Gap? “It’s simple: revived Christian men living out their faith and keeping their commitments daily with renewed passion and obedience to the Word of God. For PK it means fulfilling our call to help every church in the country have a vibrant men’s ministry . . . and to pursue reconciliation with Christians of different ethnic groups and churches” (McCartney, 1997, p. 1-2 available at http:www2.promisekeepers.org/manual/news/november97/p7.htm).

McCartney reminds his followers that to live out their faith with boldness, they will need other men around them to help. He also encourages men to start men’s ministries in their churches if one does not exist. PK provides professional quality training materials, including videotapes, audiotapes, books and periodicals to help “key men” establish and strengthen Promise Keepers in every Christian congregation (Gardner, 1996). This small group structure has been a successful trademark feature of PK and McCartney’s emphasis to continue this grass roots effort testifies of its unifying power. Promise Keepers also produces a multi-media kit, “The Next Step: From the Stadium to the Small Group”, which includes a videotape “of testimony from men whose lives have been changed by becoming part of a Promise Keepers’ small group and a step-by-step ‘Promise Builders Study Series booklet’” (Gardner, 1996, p. 5).

One way that Promise Keepers differs from social movements of the past, comes
in light of its use of the Internet as a means of communication and solidification: “For men unable to show up at the stadiums, Promise Keepers’ magazine, New Man, advertises weekly Christian men’s gatherings in cyberspace” (The Economist, 1995, p. 21). This reliance on new technology may be partly due to the ease with which messages can be delivered and the global access that is available. Also research shows that fifty percent of Promise Keepers have a bachelor’s degree or more (Van Leeuwen, 1997). PK’s higher educated following is more likely to be on-line than those who are not educated. Studies indicate that close to half of Internet subscribers are Republicans with incomes greater than $50,000 a year. Additionally, a preponderance of the discourse on the World Wide Web is of a conservative nature (March, 1997).

Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper

The Promise Keepers’ astounding success in gathering close to one million men at the Stand in the Gap conference and its continued growth and power as a conservative Christian organization can be directly attributed to the carefully calculated rhetorical strategies found in the book Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper. These promises have not only helped men change their lives, but have also been the glue that has kept PK together as a social movement.

The first three promises have to do with an individual’s ethics and conduct.

Promise 1: “A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to God’s Word in the power of the Holy Spirit” (Janssen, 1994, p. 13). PK cites this promise as its foundational commitment. “Who, how and when a man
worships determines everything about his life. That’s the reason the first promise a man needs to keep is that he’ll be *honest with God* (p. 18). PK also encourages men to enter into a prayer relationship with God that includes love, intimacy, privilege and responsibility (p. 27). To emphasize the importance of prayer, PK introduces the acronym “P.U.S.H.” or Pray Until Something Happens. First a man needs to purify himself (the “P”) by repenting of any known sin. Second, he needs to understand God’s mercy (the “U”). Third, a man needs to live a life of personal accountability to God regardless of what anyone else’s opinion might be (the “S”). Finally, a man must hold fast in prayer (the “H”). The strategy of getting men to pray for themselves causes men indirectly to pray for the advancement of the movement and become more involved emotionally and psychologically with PK’s ideology. PK relies on the idea that God’s word is his bond.

Promise 2: “A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises” (Janssen, 1994, p. 43). PK encourages men to build mentoring relationships with other men. “Every time you build into the life of another man, you launch a process that ideally will never end” (p. 47). This promise is an interesting solidification strategy, because PK teaches members not to rely on themselves, but rather on other men and ultimately on the movement. This strategy is illustrated in PK’s assertion that “every man reading this book should seek to have three individuals in his life . . . a Paul . . . a Barnabas . . . and a Timothy” (p. 53). “Paul” is an older man who is willing to build into your life through his experiences. “Barnabas” is a soul brother, “somebody who loves you but is not
impressed by you . . . to whom you can be accountable” (p. 53). “Timothy” is a younger man into whose life you can build. This promise also reinforces the small group study and support system that PK demands for its members. One reason this strategy is so effective, is PK’s acceptance of the Bible as the ultimate source of truth.

Promise 3: “A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical and sexual purity” (Janssen, 1994, p. 69). PK states that thirty-five years ago this country was in a lot better shape because it followed the Judeo-Christian ethic. “Few people questioned that chastity was a good thing, that hard work was the duty of every responsible man, that homosexual conduct was wrong, and that it was never right to lie, cheat, steal, or commit adultery. But today, our ethics and morals are no longer based on Jerusalem; they’re based on Sodom and Gomorrah” (p. 84). To commit to this promise, a man must read the scriptures daily, including memorizing, meditating and praying about them. This promise also warns men about the dangerous influence of the media which perpetuate immorality openly and can destroy any Christian man who does not carefully screen media messages. PK followers are expected to live lives of sexual purity. “For the single man, this means a willingness to wait until marriage for sexual intercourse . . . . For us married men, sexual purity means reflecting God’s absolute faithfulness to us in our faithfulness to our wives. Adultery can take many forms. Watching racy movies on a business trip in an airport hotel . . . is a form of emotional adultery that will eventually weaken the marriage” (p. 94). Promise Keepers desires men to discuss their sex lives with their small group as a form of accountability and support in times of weakness.

The remaining four promises focus on a man’s relationship to a group and to
society at large. Promise 4: “A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values” (p. 100). This strategy is a subtle nudge for men to be dominant and supportive in the home. PK asserts that the chemistry of a happy home is one where “everyone feels free to express feelings without fear of hearing ‘That’s stupid!’ ‘Only an idiot would feel like that,’ or ‘Why don’t you grow up?’ Maybe the feelings are immature, but they’re real nonetheless. It’s not our job to analyze; it is our duty to love, value and understand our mates and our children” (p. 110).

Promise 5: “A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor and by actively giving his time and resources” (Janssen, 1994, p. 131). PK asks men to support their individual pastors by praying for their success. PK claims these prayers are critical because Satan’s desire is to destroy the work of Christ throughout the world. “One of his most effective ways of doing that is to destroy pastors. If Satan can bring them down, causing disgrace and ridicule to taint the work of Christ, the nonbelieving world will not be attracted to Jesus” (p. 136). Promise Keepers employs a powerful rhetorical strategy with this promise because if PK can garner the support of clergy members, there is a natural link to the congregation that can ultimately strengthen the movement and increase its membership. When pastors and congregations pray for one another, there is a natural bond that occurs and when this relationship happens, PK is further praised as the divine catalyst that brought these groups together.

Promise 6: “A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and
denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity” (Janssen, 1994, p. 153). McCartney claims “we are going to reconcile with our Christian brothers of different races, cultures and denominations. We’re going to break down the walls that separate us so that we might demonstrate the power of biblical unity based on what we have in common: our love for Jesus and our connectedness through Him” (p. 164). To fulfill this promise, PK asks men to pray for the problems of racism to disappear from their hearts, churches, and communities. The movement also expects men to literally pursue genuine relationships with Christian men from different races and denominations. The rhetorical strategy that PK uses here borders on manipulation. PK’s logic that whoever loves God must also love his brother places the movement’s members into a logical either/or trap. If men claim to believe in God (which is also an endorsement of Promise Keepers) then they must do what God wants them to do which is follow the instruction of the leader of God’s Army, Bill McCartney.

Promise 7: “A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission

PK’s pamphlet “Biblical Unity and Biblical Truth (1997) states, “while Promise Keepers desires to call men of all Christian denominations together in biblical unity, that unity must be based on the historically essential truths of Christianity.” This statement is very broad and confusing, it is the kind of statement that people think they understand when they really do not because it sound non-confrontational. Churches do not agree on “essential truths” that is why there are so many of them. For example consider the debate over baptism—should infants be baptized? What about sprinkling vs. immersion? There is also a disagreement over the relationship between faith and works. Some Christian sects believe that without “good works” or serving other people, Jesus’ sacrifice has no claim on them, while other groups believe that merely acknowledging Him as the Savior is enough and whatever else you do is really of no consequence to your eternal destiny.
(see Matthew 28:19-20)⁴ (Janssen, 1994, p. 183). This promise is based on loving all people unconditionally. Promise Keepers again refers to its unequivocal source, the Bible, to reinforce this commandment of love to its followers. This promise is based around 1 John 5:14-15,⁵ that if a man asks for anything according to God’s will, he will receive it. To support this claim, PK cites several examples of people who have made changes in their lives including a twenty-two year old man who had reconciled with his parents after leaving home and not speaking to them since age seventeen. Promise Keepers contends that because this man became a Christian, he began to love his parents with “God’s kind of love.” An important observation about this promise is the vagueness of the word love. Love is a difficult term to define, and it is even more difficult to analyze its impact, but the PK movement seems to understand what “love” is, as an increasing number of men turn their lives to Jesus: “We don’t love people because they deserve to be loved—we love them because Christ commands it and empowers us to do so” (p. 191).

The overall goal of these seven promises is the movement’s effort to get its

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⁴ “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12: 30-31).

⁵ “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28: 19-20).
members to a level of unquestioned authority, a level in which members will follow the movement without any doubt. The final section of this book is a call to action for men to join the Promise Keepers. “God is calling you to be a Promise Keeper, a man of integrity. You know that” (p. 194). PK reminds men of the societal horrors of elective abortions, out-of-wedlock births, broken families, drug addiction and brutal violence in the media and on the streets. PK reasserts that America needs Promise Keepers who are committed to evangelism like never before by referring to the words of Billy Graham: “It’s either back to the Bible or back to the jungle” (p. 199).

This study argues that Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper has been a successful rhetorical tool for the movement. This claim is based on at least two basic assumptions. First, the rapid increase in conference attendance since the book’s release, going from almost 279,000 men in 1994, to over 727,000 men in 1995 and over 1.1 million men in 1996 (PK Fact Sheet, 1997) demonstrates that the ideology advanced in Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper has been well received by Christian men. Additionally, the Christian publishing and retailing industry is seeing more men in its stores, “partly because there is more product . . . nearly a quarter of shoppers in Christian stores are men, compared to one in six 15 years ago” (Rabey, 1996, p. 60). This book has spent more than a year on the Christian bestseller list which is more evidence of its salient nature (Christianity Today, 1995).

The second assumption is the legitimacy that the establishment has given Promise Keepers by reacting to the messages set forth in the Seven Promises text. Bower, Ochs and Jensen (1993) contend “generally, establishments do not respond, except by
avoidance, to the petitions of agitators . . .” (p. 53). When the establishment reacts with
counterpersuasion, it sends a message to the agitators that they are at least heightening
awareness of their ideology. Counterpersuasion is an attempt to convince the agitators
they are wrong, and if this attempt is successful, the threat to the system is minimized
(Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993).

Promise Keepers has been criticized on a variety of different points as Kimmel
(1996) observes: “Among the Promise Keepers, there is no tolerance for homosexuality
or feminism; indeed, the bargain struck between the Christian husband and his wife
would keep her out of the workplace and in the home with the children, where God
intended her to be all along” (p. 16). Beal’s (1997) analysis finds that the Seven Promises
text promotes a traditional definition of masculinity, “one in which men’s and women’s
roles are segregated and men’s roles are given more social status” (p. 275).

Other opponents maintain that “PK is an overtly political group that is thinly
disguising its true intention, which is to make everybody just like them, and they have no
tolerance for those that are not just like them . . . . This is not the kind of America we
want to live in. We do not want this to become the Christian version of Iran” (Adlof,
1997, p. 8). Swomley (1997) provides more support of Promise Keepers’ alleged
political agenda: “PK doesn’t blame the violent crime in the United States and high
prison population on such things as drugs or a lack of job opportunities for inner city
youth; rather it points the finger at abortion” (p. 11).

Further, PK has been criticized for its views on racial reconciliation: “We are
cconcerned that Promise Keepers calls for racial harmony but does not speak to its 96
percent white membership about the racial advantage that whiteness gives them in this society. Institutionalized racism is not healed by hugs" (Swomley, 1997, p. 12).

Much of the establishment’s criticism of PK centers around three issues: male dominance, homosexuality and racial reconciliation, (which have links to promises 3, 4 and 6). This study argues that the establishment’s attack on these issues has forced the Promise Keepers to defend and adjust its rhetoric in order for the movement to survive. Thus, an analysis of these promises is a critical step in determining the effect of PK’s rhetoric.

Male Dominance: Reclaiming Your Manhood

Former star athlete and Christian minister Billy Sunday believed that being a Christian and being a man were one in the same. “Many think a Christian has to be a sort of dishrag proposition, a wishy-washy, sissified sort of galoot that lets everybody make a doormat out of him . . . . Let me tell you the manliest man is the man who will acknowledge Jesus Christ” (in Balmer, 1997, p. 2). Promise Keepers claims to understand exactly what it means to be a man, but does being a man and a Promise Keeper come at the expense of being a woman? As Beal (1997) notes, PK’s main purpose “is to evangelize men. A Promise Keeper is defined as a man who lives in accordance with God’s word and who makes a promise to live by the standards thereof . . . . If you could somehow freeze-frame biblical manhood or in some way boil it down into its component parts, you would see five elements that are always present . . . assertiveness, self-control, independence, self-confidence and stability . . .” (p. 276). Not
only has PK been criticized for its admonishment for men to reclaim their roles as leaders of the home, but its all-male attendance policy at stadium rallies has more than one group of people shouting foul play.

Groothuis and Groothuis (1995) argue that “talk of male leadership—however ill-defined—is bound to attract men who have inextricably associated masculinity with authority” (p. 21). The confusion of associating godliness with manliness points in the unbiblical direction of a gender requirement for spirituality. “Popular Christian teachings—PK or otherwise—that packages spirituality along lines of gender (devotions for women, worship for men, and so forth) is saying, in effect that Christlikeness is different for men than it is for women. Spiritual gifts, however, do not come in shades of pink and blue” (Groothuis and Groothuis, 1995, p. 20)! Thus, if the seven promises “describe the distinctive characteristics of a real man, then all that remains to characterize a real woman are some relatively trivial traits related to female sexual roles” (p. 20).

Characterizing women according to sexual roles is what many feminists have concluded that Promise Keepers is really about: the subservience of women. Many feel that the group’s underlying goal is “the creation of an ultraconservative, authoritarian nation segregated along gender lines that merges church and state and returns men to the helm of all political and religious institutions” (Hetherly, 1997, p. 14).

Some of PK’s most adamant criticism has come from the National Organization for Women (NOW). Leaders of NOW claim that Promise Keepers is really pushing a political agenda designed to subordinate women inside and outside of the home:

“Promise Keepers have created a false veneer of men taking responsibility, when they
really mean taking charge. Their targets are women, lesbians, and gay men and anyone who supports abortion rights or opposes an authoritarian, religiously based government” (Hetherly, 1997, p. 15). These beliefs have led the organization to protest at rallies and create and launch a national “No Surrender” campaign against PK in August of 1997 (Griffith, 1997). NOW hopes this campaign will heighten awareness about the dangers of PK and discourage anyone from supporting them. This criticism appears to be in direct response to PK’s rhetoric. For example, at a stadium conference speaker Rick Beggs suggested that women lacked the ability to work on the family budget and felt that they should be excluded from the process: “It will only cause tension to do this [referring to the family budget] within the family. Instead, the Godly man should work on such matters with other men in his discussion group” (Higgins, 1997, p. 23).

There are, however, many women who feel that PK has helped their husbands change for the better. Political commentator Laura Ingraham praised PK and criticized NOW for “once again being out of step with countless American women---in this case, those who have applauded the family-centered message promoted by the men’s group” (p. B6). Even with this female support, it appears that PK has still buckled enough from NOW’s criticism to make some changes.

Although, Promise Keepers clearly states in the Seven Promises of a Promise

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6 Another PK supporter, Donna Osborne, recalls her experience with the group. “My husband went to his first PK rally about four years ago and has become a more loving, considerate person. They [the critics] misunderstand the situation here. If they were to come to know the Lord, things would be different. I feel sorry for them because they have misinformation” (Adlof, 1997, p. 8).
Keeper, that men are to be the leaders of the home, in spiritual and financial ways, it appears that some of this pressure from the establishment has caused PK to soften its stance on male dominance. Smalley (1996) provides one example of this change: “To honor your mate is to tell her she is equally capable of calling the plays—that means not only encouraging her to have a say in running the team, but to listen to her viewpoint and try the plays she calls” (p. 30). Further evidence of this change comes from PK’s conference speakers. “We’re not asking men to go back with an iron fist. We’re asking them to go back on their knees, with a spirit of service and respect for their wives and families” (Gilbreath, 1995, p. 24). After a PK member returns from a rally, President Randy Phillips assures that the man who comes back is not trying to “misuse or impose his masculine authority. He’s a man who wants to give, serve, listen, honor, and care. Women see the positive change and realize the influence it will have in their lives and families. They tell their friends, ‘You better send Charlie! Look what’s happening to my George.’” (Miller, 1996, p. 83).

At times, PK draws a hard sexist line about men’s roles. PK conference speaker Ed Cole provides a clear example:

Act more like a man! Why? Because when a man acts like a child it forces his wife to act like his mother. And when a man forces his wife to act like his mother, she does two things for him. She makes decisions for him and she corrects him. Now there’s problem with that! . . . When a man acts like a child and forces his wife to become his mother, the problem is—you can’t make love to your mother! (Spalding, 1996, p. 262).
Cole's statement reinforces the stereotype that men are leaders and women are sex objects.

At other times, PK speakers claim that men should not do anything to dishonor women. "Whenever freedoms are restricted rather than encouraged, you dishonor her. Whenever you pout, sulk, withdraw or clam up, you are dishonoring her" (Smalley, 1996, p. 33). PK also points out that "Your wife needs her privacy and emotional space, which you should honor at her request. Let her call the shots without always having to explain or defend herself" (p. 32).

PK maintains that its conferences are best suited for men only because "in the absence of women, many of the men in the stadium felt liberated to open up" (The Economist, 1995, p. 22). The way that Promise Keepers has defended and adjusted its rhetoric on issues dealing with male dominance has been specific in some instances and ambiguous in others. In fact, this ambiguity has functioned as a type of objective test. "Each listener can hear what he or she wants in them [ambiguous messages]: a message of egalitarian, mutual servanthood or one of reclaimed male headship . . . this ambiguity does, after all, benefit the movement in terms of numerical growth" (Van Leeuwen, 1997, p. 251). So far Promise Keepers has embraced a rhetoric of both servanthood and leadership, a position that is ambiguous enough to make feminists from both sides push the movement for greater clarity (Van Leeuwen, 1997). Although many people are excited about the potential that PK offers, many others are asking "Is it men's hunger to be present in their relationships with their wives and children? Or is it hunger to be on top" (p. 254)?
Homosexuality: Hating the Sin and Loving the Sinner

Bowers, Ochs and Jensen (1993) state that "a strictly ideological statement is not made to persuade or to alter behavior but to define the position of an individual or group" (p. 2). McCartney first captured the attention of the national media during Colorado's debate over Amendment 2, the initiative that would deny gay and lesbian rights. McCartney spoke at rallies in support of Amendment 2 and used his coaching position at the University of Colorado to influence the public to support this stand against homosexuality. McCartney was reprimanded by university officials who told him to back away from the issue. McCartney complied with their request, but in the process used a school press conference to publicly condemn homosexuality as an absolute abomination before God. This one incident caused an uproar in Colorado and other parts of the U.S. as people were quick to label McCartney and the Promise Keepers as homophobic in an attempt to destroy McCartney's credibility as a leader. Although the Amendment 2 initiative passed, it was later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court (Gardner, 1996). However, criticism against PK did not subside, in fact it became more severe with the brunt of the attack focused on McCartney. Many individuals wanted McCartney's resignation because of his radical views and wanted nothing to do with the Promise Keepers. Bowers, Ochs and Jensen (1993) maintain that the establishment often encourages those people who speak out against a movement to continue this counter-persuasion in hopes that it will damage the leader's character and ultimately destroy the movement. This tactic is known as banishment. Banishment is a particularly effective strategy for the establishment since "relatively few members of an agitation movement
usually carry its grievances and ideology to the decision makers of an establishment, the tactic of banishment can weaken the movement by removing its leaders" (Bowers, Ochs and Jensen, 1993, p. 58).

What exactly does PK believe about homosexuality? It shares a similar historic position taken by Evangelicals and many Catholics: “that sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed in the context of heterosexual marriage. We believe that the Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality violates God’s creative design for a husband and a wife and that it is a sin (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10)” (PK Net, 1997 available at http://www.promisekeepers.org/).

Promise Keepers’ promise 3 asks men to be sexually pure. Although PK’s views on homosexuality are clear, there is virtually no mention of the practice in Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper. PK admits that a life of sexual purity is not easy, but the entire focus of this chapter is on heterosexual relationships. The movement believes in abstinence before marriage and completely fidelity afterwards, but Promise Keepers

7 “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in the lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet” (Romans 1:24-27). “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).
avoids the topic of homosexuality. Gardner (1996) suggests one reason for the avoidance is that the issue is simply too controversial and PK's conscious choice to make few public statements about it is very wise politically. It is tough for PK's critics to attack an issue like homosexuality when Promise Keepers will not respond to the establishment's criticism. Additionally, any response by PK to the criticism on this issue grants the discussion over homosexuality more legitimacy which is something that the movement definitely does not want to do.

Another reason that PK has successfully weathered the criticism over homosexuality is the respect that many people grant to the Bible as a trusted source. The Washington Post (1994) reports "Promise Keepers has become a controversial force in large part because of the stands some leaders have taken on primacy of men in the household and the view that the Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality violates God's creative design for a husband and a wife and that it is a sin" (p. 1 available at http://www.vix.com/pub/men/orgs/promisekeepers/wapost.html).

In this strategy PK has combined avoidance with a "take it or leave it" attitude that has not received a large enough backlash for PK to take very seriously, but Promise Keepers has made some subtle effort to respond to the establishment. The main response is a clarification about homosexuality on the movement's Web page. "Because we have experienced the love of Christ, we desire to share His love with all men. While we have clear convictions regarding the issue of homosexuality, we invite homosexuals to be recipients of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness, available to everyone through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We support their being included and welcomed
in all our events” (PK Net, 1997 available http://www.promisekeepers.org/). The only conclusion which can reasonably be drawn is that Promise Keepers' view on moral issues places the growing movement on the political right which the movement does not seem to dispute (Washington Post, 1994).

Racial Reconciliation: All that Glitters is not Gold

The largest rhetorical challenge that Promise Keepers faces is overcoming racism. As McCartney believes, “You can’t say you love God and not love your brother” (Christian Century, 1996, p. 254). This issue has forced PK to adjust its rhetoric by widening the scope nearly to the point of complete ambiguity. But like other issues for the movement, these changes have not occurred overnight.

Promise Keepers' focus on racial reconciliation can be traced to a funeral service for Teddy Woods in the mid 1980s. Woods was an African American attorney in the Denver area who had excelled as a student-athlete for Colorado University prior to the McCartney era. McCartney, an acquaintance of Woods and the current coach at C.U., went to the funeral out of respect for a man who shared his own passion for football. McCartney states, “what happened to me that day changed my life . . . The mournful singing of the mostly black congregation expressed a level of pain I hadn’t seen or felt before” (Janssen, 1994, p. 157). McCartney wept uncontrollably because he interpreted the suffering to be part of a much larger context of oppression and disappointment. “The grieving and groaning exceeded anything I had ever experienced. I have never been the same since then. I had come in touch, for the first time, with the pain, struggle, despair
and anguish of the black people” (p. 158). This experience would impact the Promise Keepers, whether the movement wanted it or not.

McCartney’s spoken desire to reverse the racism in America first surfaced in 1991. McCartney stood on stage in front of one of PK’s first assemblies (about 4,200 men) and received what he felt was a genuine revelation from God. In the revelation, McCartney felt like the Lord spoke to him and said, “Look at the audience here . . . what do you see?” McCartney’s sheepishly replied, “Well Lord, they’re almost all white guys . . .” (Janssen, 1994, p. 124). This troubled PK’s leader, because all day long McCartney and his colleagues had been telling the men in the arena if they could each recruit one man every month, PK could fill Folsom stadium the following year. McCartney told his followers that God wanted a full and fair representation of all men and unless this charge was answered, He would not attend the Folsom stadium rally planned for 1992.

McCartney’s message met with great hostility and after the conference he received letters scolding him and challenging his authority. McCartney was confused over the negative response to his message and over the next few months his confusion increased. (Abraham, 1997).

Following the 1991 conference, McCartney left on a five city tour to speak to churches about Promise Keepers and his new focus on racism. The racism message got the same dismal response in Indianapolis, Anaheim, and even Denver. Finally, in McCartney’s last stop, Portland, he again addressed racism and was met with icy stares at the conclusion of his remarks. After McCartney sat down, a 60-year old black man came out of the audience and walked up to the podium and with tears streaming down his face
cried: "I never thought in my lifetime that I would hear a white man say what's been said here today. Maybe there is hope" (Abraham, 1997, p. 128). Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) point out that a leader learns particular skills through "costly trial and error as the movement unfolds" (p. 92). This one event validated McCartney's revelation and the message of racial reconciliation has been a part of PK's rhetoric ever since.

The first noticeable adjustment that PK has made to its rhetoric is the change from the word "racism" to the words "racial reconciliation." PK encourages its members to seek out relationships with men of other races and talks about changing people's hearts, but does not mention the words "racial equality." Abraham (1997) observes that PK "avoids talking about most of the tough issues, such as jobs for men of color, drugs in the community and access to better education and housing opportunities, choosing instead to focus on the spiritual aspects of these problems" (p. 129). This rhetorical tactic is a good move for PK because the deliberate choice of the "warm and fuzzy" word reconciliation pacifies its members and some critics with the perception that racial inequality remains a major thrust for Promise Keepers (Hetherly, 1997), whether they actually make any changes or not. As Hahn and Gonchar (1971) point out, "A movement weakens itself when it becomes too specific because the effect of such over-specification is to narrow the affected audience and consequently to limit the potential number of activities" (p. 46).

Promise Keepers has grown rapidly, but its rhetoric is only partially successful, because PK remains predominantly a white men's movement. Even four of PK's most prominent African American speakers (Wellington Boone, Joseph Garlington, E.V. Hill and John Perkins) are associated with a controversial, ultra-right-wing organization.
known as the Coalition on Revival, which again raises the question of an underlying political agenda for the Promise Keepers.

PK has made the discussion of racial reconciliation an ever increasing focus at its stadium rallies and McCartney has led the charge: “I want to share with you that white racial superiority can be defined as insensitivity to the pain of the people of color. We do not look at their pain; we have not washed their feet like Jesus said, privately and publicly” (Abraham, 1997, p. 130). Simply because PK has given racial reconciliation prominent attention, is another example of the ambiguous, broad-based nature of PK’s rhetoric, using phrases like “looking at the pain” and “insensitivity” do not suggest courses of action.

The movement continues to use this strategy, but in response to pressure from the establishment, PK has taken two symbolic actions. The first came in 1996 at the Georgia Dome when PK held a conference for ministers only. The three day event showed men of color embracing one another and discussing ways in which they might bring all men together into the unity of Christ (White, 1996). The second action was a timely response to church burnings in the southern U.S. PK has committed one million dollars to help rebuild burned-out churches. Additionally, PK plans to ask its members to pray and promises to continue to ask men to change their hearts (PK Times, 1997, available at http://www.promisekeepers.org/). The money is a significant contribution, but praying and speaking are not always synonymous with doing and in this case provide a perception of involvement without a real commitment from PK.

Although the movement has continued to grow, PK is still being criticized over
the issue of racial reconciliation. Some critics feel that Promise Keepers is for “equal-opportunity bigots, disliking all different people regardless of race, creed or color” (Franklin and Hetherly, 1997, p. 26). Other critics feel that Promise Keepers has deliberately chosen the softer rhetoric of reconciliation as its focus to conceal other motives. The idea that only changes in people’s hearts is important is merely a means of avoiding more substantive issues (Conason, Cokorinos and Ross, 1996).

By having a broad, ambiguous rhetoric, PK has successfully advanced the movement by adapting to internal and external criticism. Columnist Kathleen Parker adds her analysis: “If half a million white guys commit each year to work for racial harmony, to spend more time with their kids, to pray instead of striking out, to work on an imperfect marriage rather than seeking solace on Sunset Boulevard, who’s worse off . . . Maybe I’m missing something, but this sounds like progress to me” (in Mattox, 1995, p. 41).

The seven promises that PK has based the movement on have been successful because they have hit a responsive chord in men who are searching for ways to make their lives better. Much of the reason for PK’s growth comes directly from the environment in which its message is given, the sports stadium.

The Stadium: Three Cheers for Coach Mac

Large stadiums around the nation have been transformed as one section of sideline seats chants “We love Jesus, yes we do, we love Jesus how ‘bout you?” The cheers of spirited affirmation burst from the other sideline, followed by an answer: “We love Jesus,
yes we do . . .” (Wagenheim, 1996). Much of the fascination with Promise Keepers lies in the fact that these rallies represent something that Christian men can do together (Gilbreath, 1995). Of course the choice of venue is an excellent selection, considering that the movement’s leader is a national champion college football coach. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) explain that “leaders tend to become totally identified with the cause, and often the cause becomes totally identified with them . . . Thus, successful leaders are able to instill absolute devotion, love, trust and dependence in members” (p. 95).

McCarty’s reputation as a winner and the fact that he has been honest about his moral failings have given the charismatic coach an appeal that is tough to dispute. One thing seems clear, the sports arena has been an effective medium for PK’s rhetoric.

Balmer (1997) argues that “the venue for Promise Keepers rallies underscores the sympathies between sports and spirituality. The world of athletics offers an alternative universe, a subculture which provides a refuge from the larger world. In contrast to that larger world, the world of sports is an orderly world” (p. 11-12). This “sports world” provides a common language, shared assumptions and a support system.

It is no accident that McCartney has chosen the sports arena, because sports typically provides a common vocabulary for male interaction and bonding. He is attempting to speak the language of the disaffected male (Balmer, 1997). This common language epitomizes a man’s world; characteristics such as being vocal, upset, yelling and celebrating. “These characteristics connote an active engagement that is often associated with strong leadership” (Beal, 1997, p. 281).

In addition to a common language, the use of sports in PK’s rhetoric provides a
shared set of assumptions for everyone involved. "What all major sports have in common since the age of industrialism are clear boundaries and precise delineations. The rules may be complex, but they too are precise, with every situation and contingency provided for. Something is either in bounds or out of bounds, safe or out, fair or foul. The only thing that can disrupt this orderly universe is a misjudgment" (Balmer, 1997, p. 13-14). The fact that sports imposes a simplistic conceptualization of issues in black and white terms further strengthens the impact of PK's rhetorical environment.

Finally, PK provides a safety zone for men where they can share their fears and insecurities: "Women are not allowed at Promise Keepers rallies because . . . the conferences are designed for specific men's issues in the context of an all male setting" (Balmer, 1997, p. 15). Whether or not these issues are for men only is not the point, it is the security that men feel that makes the stadium setting so powerful. "We want to create an environment where men can let down and be real . . . Being real . . . means unabashedly shedding tears, embracing one another during prayer and singing, huddling to confess their hidden sins and fears and, very simply, being free to play" (Gilbreath, 1995, p. 23).

Promise Keepers has effectively used the sports arena as a rhetorical tool to instruct men about the seven promises that will bring their lives to Jesus. Although the movement still has a considerable hurdle to clear in the form of racial reconciliation and plans to launch the movement worldwide, Promise Keepers has demonstrated the ability to effectively recruit and maintain its membership during the maintenance stage. McCartney has demonstrated PK's ability to make the necessary rhetorical adjustments
on the issues of male dominance, homosexuality and racial reconciliation mainly through avoidance and ambiguity. With the addition of McCartney to full-time status, he has evolved from the fiery "agitator" to the bureaucrat whose primary concern is maintaining the movement, increasing its membership and cohesiveness and its financial power as Promise Keepers wait for the next triggering event that will rejuvenate the movement and push its ideology to the dominant position in American society.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

On February 18, 1998, the leadership of Promise Keepers announced to its staff that they would be paid until March 31 and no further. This action marked the beginning of PK’s shift to relying solely on donations to fund its ministry (Christian Community Network, 1998, available at http://www.christcom.net/brotherhood/). This income reorganization represents a significant transition that is consistent with PK’s proposed plan to hold nineteen stadium rallies between May and October 1998 with no charge for admission. PK is calling its plan “Open the Gates in 98.” This strategy is designed to “remove all financial barriers to participation in Promise Keepers” (Christian Community Network, 1998, available: http://www.christcom.net/brotherhood/).

Prior to this change in the financial structure of PK, the movement charged $60 registration fees for each of its stadium conferences. The fees provided steady financial revenue to fund 64 of these events since 1992. These admission fees represented seventy-two percent of PK’s income. Promise Keepers expects that local communities and national sponsors will cover the costs of producing the stadium conferences during 1998 (Christian Community Network, 1998, available: http://www.christcom.net/brotherhood/).
McCartney told his staff that as soon as stable and sufficient donations were received, re-staffing would occur. He also told PK employees not to despair, reminding them of his own convictions: “I have a broken heart, but I don’t have a discouraged heart. I have a heart that is filled with hope” (Christian Community Network, 1998, available: http://www.christcom.net/brotherhood/). McCartney continued his charge to Christian church leaders to bring men back to church and bring America’s churches together: “We have seen how God has used this ministry to change men’s lives and lead them back to church. Now, as the fees to all events are removed, it is time for those churches to assist us in our mission to men” (Christian Community Network, 1998, available: http://www.christcom.net/brotherhood/).

This move sparks two critical questions about the Promise Keepers. First, why would the movement which was making over $100 million a year, mainly from conference revenues, suddenly banish this source of income? Second, what will happen to the movement now that the necessary funds to direct its future have been thrown to the winds of “donation only?”

In PK’s case, the historic march on Washington cost the movement about $9 million to stage, placing a huge drain on year-end revenues (Kenworthy, 1998). In addition to the costs involved in the Washington gathering, the organization still had the heavy burden of an estimated $20 million annual payroll that still needed to be met in 1998. Perhaps the combination of these two events left the movement unable to meet its financial obligations.

Promise Keepers has a different interpretation of these changes: “We believe this
is just a transitional period and that in the foreseeable future we will be able to stabilize our revenues and increase them to the point where we can bring [paid] staffers back on board . . . . Our donations are higher now than they have ever been but they are replacing a much larger revenue stream” (Kenworthy, 1998, p. A03). McCartney and his staff reached this decision after three months of consideration and then PK’s eighteen-member board of directors voted unanimously in favor of dropping the fee for all conference rallies. McCartney claims that removing conference fees was the goal all along, but we “needed to grow the organization first and gain credibility before going to free events” (Culver, 1998, p. 2).

There are two interesting outcomes from this financial shift that PK leaders do not appear too eager to talk about. First, Kenworthy (1998) points out that there are no figures available about how far PK’s operating revenue has fallen since the organization made the shift to donations. Additionally, PK leaders are quiet about the impact on senior leadership whose salaries in 1996 ranged from “$132,000 for the top executive to $75,000 and up for most of 11 vice presidents” (p. A03). Many people are wondering why Promise Keepers is being so close-mouthed about the actual revenues, and the answer appears to be that the movement is not as financially sound as it claims to be. As Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) suggest, these financial challenges are tremendous during the Maintenance Stage and the movement must be involved in incessant fundraising in order to support “organizations, property and publications” (p. 82). McCartney seems focused on his plans to take PK worldwide. “It’s a slam dunk . . . God is faithful. It’s gonna happen. We just have to keep our eye on Him” (Culver, 1998, p.
Although McCartney's rhetoric is brimming with optimism, his enthusiasm may only be a veiled attempt to cover up the movement's financial straits.

The second interesting outcome is PK's apparent lack of concern about employment for its former staff. Currently, Promise Keepers has no intention of helping laid-off staffers find new employment. McCartney said, "They will have time to look. I'm sure they will all get more than one offer" (Culver, 1998, p. 2). PK hopes that its former staff will stay on as volunteers, but the economic reality of that plan seems difficult to swallow, especially when the movement endorses such a laisse-faire attitude about people's financial situations. PK appears to have faith in its followers and has launched a program for those men who consider themselves part of the organization to stay involved with the ministry during this critical transitional phase. "The purpose of the Volunteer Department is to maximize the ministry efforts of Promise Keepers through volunteer services, striving for excellence in volunteer management nationally and internationally" (Serving with PK, 1998, available: http://www.promisekeepers.org/pknav.map?55,63). PK is asking its members to volunteer whatever time they can at PK headquarters in Denver by answering phones, filing, taking inventory and doing landscaping. Additionally, PK is asking other men to volunteer at conference events. Promise Keepers needs 3,000 volunteers at each stadium event. Men can volunteer in person, by phone or over the internet: "Volunteering is very close to the heart of God. It represents the selfless, caring, giving qualities to which Christians are called. It suggests a sense of family where a growing love for God and relationship with Him is the goal, and a growing love for each other is part of the process."
Sometimes the work is hard and the hours are long. Often individuals seem to labor in obscurity, making sacrifices that only the Lord can know. Such is the nature of serving” (Serving with PK, 1998, available: http://www.promisekeepers.org/pknav.map?55,63). PK’s rhetoric focuses on emotional appeal and hopes to get men involved through guilt.

Even as troubling as PK’s financial situation appears to be, there may be another reason why the movement has shifted to donations only. Snyder (1994) points out that PK cannot be ultimately successful if it “succumbs to a narrow political agenda” (p. 20-21). This means that Promise Keepers’ efforts to stay “above” politics forces the movement to be predominantly silent about political concerns that are moral issues at heart. Even with efforts to remain politically neutral, PK’s call for racial reconciliation appears to be a political statement. If all races of men come together under PK’s umbrella, the movement not only benefits from increased membership, but is strengthened in more important political ways, as Snyder (1994) explains: “committed African-American Christians are often less conservative politically than their white counterparts. Thus, cross-racial partnership is a safeguard against political co-optation” (p. 21). Thus it is critical for PK to maintain the public perception of “politically neutrality” while remaining focused on racial reconciliation.

Promise Keepers’ other concern is the potential loss of control that may occur if the movement becomes institutionalized. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) argue that when a movement is forced to rely on external support and begins to cooperate with members of the establishment (which in this case can be any individual or organization who is not directly involved with PK) it runs the risk of outright co-optation. When co-
option occurs social movements allow "institutions [the opportunity to] seemingly take on the cause" (p. 156). When the establishment takes on the cause, movements (like Promise Keepers) are often frustrated because the movement is now involved with its sworn enemy financially and ideologically. This merger of agitator and establishment effectively defuses the movement usually before its goals can be reached and the movement assumes an institutional role. Allowing someone else to be in control of the decisions would spell certain death for the Promise Keepers.

The second major question that PK must answer about its future is funding. Social movements need money to survive and PK must carefully address the likelihood that relying almost exclusively on donations will be a permanent financial solution. The key to PK's success has been the ability to fund all of its projects like stadium rallies, videos, books and other supporting literature, which is now in jeopardy without a guaranteed income. McCartney has begun to address the future of PK and its anticipated success from donations by reaching out to other churches with a plea for help.

McCaitney asserts that Promise Keepers is not competing with other pastors who struggle to keep their own churches afloat. He believes that "this is the time for churches to stand as one. This isn't about the organization, but God calling us to bring men together. There was a wonderful manifestation of this in Washington, D.C." (Culver, 1998, p. 2). So far, McCartney claims that PK has been promised $1 million in pledges from 1,000 churches donating $1,000 each to further Promise Keepers' ministry (Culver, 1998, p. 1). McCartney is quick to remind other churches about the positive influence that PK has had on their congregations through its efforts to push men into church service and worship by
faithfully abiding by the seven promises of a Promise Keeper. He also appeals to the common ground PK shares with all Christian denominations that believe that the United States would be a much stronger nation if all people were practicing Christians. This guilt trip approach may help the movement in the short term, but $1 million in pledges now is a long way from the $100 million that the organization has been accustomed to in the past. McCartney states firmly that “God wants us to go global,” but without a steady income, this plan appears to need a miracle in order to be successful (Kenworthy, 1998, p. A03).

What Have We Learned?

One of the greatest challenges of this study is the fact that it involves religion. Generally, conversion to a religion is such a personal event that people often have a hard time explaining it logically. They describe their experience in terms of the ambiguous feelings of the heart and explain conversion with statement like “it just feels right.” This ambiguity makes it difficult to identify exactly what causes a person to become converted to a particular faith. When religious conversion is combined with a social movement, isolating the reasons that people become involved is even more challenging. What one person might consider divine intervention, another person might consider mere coincidence. The one constant in this situation is the fact that PK has tapped into the psyche of the American male in a powerful way. This study has demonstrated that Promise Keepers’ stadium rallies have supplied men with a significant support system by
providing an outlet for men to bond with one another and at the same time discover basic religious methods they believe will improve their lives.

This study has also illustrated how Promise Keepers has been able to tailor its message to the individual members of its audience by deliberately using ambiguous rhetoric which has bypassed the traditional fight among Christian churches about which sect is right. Disagreements over doctrine are removed because men are instructed to stop thinking about themselves as Catholics, Protestants or Baptists, but rather as Promise Keepers. Because PK has no particular religious affiliation it offers neutral ground where Christian men can come together and worship Christ without going against their prior denominational convictions.

Another way that PK has successfully manifested its ambiguity is the context of “racial reconciliation.” Because racial reconciliation is defined so broadly as all men coming together in Christ, this has left men free to make their own interpretations about exactly what racial reconciliation means and consequently believe that their conclusions are correct. Promise Keepers has effectively managed to avoid the snares that usually occur when a movement begins to broaden its scope (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994).

An additional finding about PK’s rhetoric shows that the use of sports has ambiguous overtones. PK uses sports because generally speaking it is a common bond which has clear rules and simple explanations that can be used as the background to discuss more substantive issues. Promise Keepers uses broad sports analogies like “winning one for Christ” and treating your wife like “an all pro” as part of its rhetoric, but does not clearly define what these phrases mean. Once again, men are given the freedom
to draw their own conclusions while thinking that they are correct. More often than not critics would consider men's link to sports as stereotypical at best, but PK has shown that the stadium and sports analogies are an effective way to reach and mobilize well over a million men.

Additionally the world of sports has given PK an effective tool that has allowed the movement to prosper without a heavy reliance on the media. Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) maintain that unless movements receive considerable visibility in the media, they usually do not survive. PK has effectively circumvented the dilemma that the lack of media coverage causes through its stadium rallies. These rallies have taken place with or without media coverage and have been successful in recruiting men to join the movement. The group managed to sneak into national prominence through its stadium conferences and its grass roots efforts in local congregations to have men meet regularly in small groups. By focusing on the worth and importance of the individual member, PK has garnered an extremely loyal following which was demonstrated in part by the assembly of men who gathered in Washington in October 1997.

This study shows that men in America are searching for answers, which may be a sign of the changing landscape of the workplace and the breakdown of the family or may suggest that America's men feel they can turn to God for help. Also, the fact that PK has filled stadium after stadium with men demonstrates the need to study a men's movement because of the huge success of the Promise Keepers.

This study has also introduced the idea that new communication technologies are having a significant impact on the evolution of the Promise Keepers and by extension the
conservative right. The continued development of the World Wide Web will allow movement leaders to communicate directly with individual members of the public and can, at least to some extent, bypass the filter that mainstream media coverage exerts over the movement's rhetoric. The revolution in information delivery will have a profound effect on the evolution of future social movements and will force a reexamination of existing theory.

For the larger picture of social movement research, this study has demonstrated the utility of Stewart, Smith and Denton's (1994) life cycle theory and its usefulness in isolating specific rhetorical events and strategies that must occur in order for the movement to be successful. This life cycle theory offers clearly defineable stages that help organize any criticism of a social movement.

This study of the Promise Keepers also suggests that communication scholars have a rich area of study available in the context of men's movements. As the literature review reveals, very little has been written about men's movements from a communication perspective.

Implications for Future Research

One area of future study may focus on the group's involvement in politics. Promise Keepers' adamantly maintains that it does not have a political agenda. "Promise Keepers is politically neutral and is not politically motivated. PK has no candidates to endorse, no legislation to advance, and no partisan agenda. The entire message of PK remains centered around the seven promises of a Promise Keeper" (November 1997,
available at: http://www.promisekeepers.org/). Critics of the movement feel that this claim has never really been the case. Wagenheim (1996) believes that "when push comes to shove, these and the thousands of other Promise Keepers are likely to pull voting booth levers to abolish abortion or curtail gay rights. Ultimately, these are a voting bloc—an evangelical voting bloc" (p. 76). Bellant (1995a) also supports the notion that Promise Keepers has a hidden agenda. "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" (p. 85). The Trojan horse analogy may have even more weight in 1998 as PK leans heavily on other churches for financial support.

Another area of study would focus on the movement’s future evolution. In 1998, PK may enter into the final stage in the life cycle of a social movement, Termination (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994). Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) argue that social movements are often absorbed by established institutions like political parties, religious denominations or labor unions. Presently, PK is vulnerable to the possibility of co-optation, because movements are similar to many other organizations where whoever pays the bills calls the shots. Because Promise Keepers has received a great deal of support from Christian Right groups, there is the potential that PK could become a political pawn for the Christian Coalition or other similar organizations. The next presidential election in 2000 will be a particularly interesting year to see if PK endorses a candidate separately or in connection with the Christian right. There is also the potential
that PK's members and sympathizers will become discouraged and drop back into the
institutions from which they came (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994).

Other studies about the Promise Keepers could include an examination of the
growth of the movement outside of the United States. There are independently operated
PK organizations in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and the United
Kingdom which could be studied to determine the extent of PK's effectiveness abroad
(Culver, 1998). These groups appear to have prospered without the direct influence of
movement icon Bill McCartney, which may lend more credibility and insight into the real
power of the movement. Studying PK abroad will also be particularly interesting if the
movement begins to fade in this country. McCartney announced at the Stand in the Gap
rally in Washington, that God wanted PK to spread out around the world. If other PK
organizations do indeed spring up around the world, what impact will this have on the
movement's future?

Communication scholarship could also be enhanced by a detailed rhetorical
analysis of the movement's web page. How effective will this tool be for PK and other
conservative movements? Internet usage is rapidly growing and as access becomes
increasingly available, more people will be able to get involved with social movements.
This technology provides movement leaders with an unlimited "soapbox" to talk to their
followers and it allows these followers a way to provide immediate and detailed
feedback. The Internet has the capability to revolutionaryize the recruiting and
solidification of social movements, because people no longer have to be physically with
the movement to be involved.
This study has focused largely on the rhetoric of founder Bill McCartney, but he is not the only leader of the Promise Keepers. There have been other leaders who have had an important role in developing PK's message. Comparisons of the rhetoric of other leaders with that of McCartneys would supply even more information about the evolution of the movement. The impact of different leadership and personality styles often account for the success or failure of a social movement.

Finally, Van Leeuwen (1997) states that there is still "no systematic study profiling the wives of the Promise Keepers . . . fully 30 percent of Promise Keepers' volunteer force doing behind-the-scenes work at rallies are women . . . " (p. 253). These women need to be studied because of their supportive role and contribution to PK's growth. Some women have even decided to create their own version of PK called Promise Reapers. Promise Reapers is a type of support group that draws women together who are happy to see men who are dedicated to becoming better Christians, husbands and fathers.

Halbrook (1995) claims that "the only true test of revival is its lasting fruit. Are moral attitudes and behaviors permanently transformed? Has Jesus Christ become the enduring focus of those lives" (p. 23)? The recent financial shift resulting in layoffs and greater reliance on other churches will demonstrate the real depth and strength of this movement. The remaining months of 1998 will determine ultimately if PK will survive. Although it may be too early to predict how committed PK's members are, it is safe to say that the chips are definitely not stacked in the movement's favor.

Possibly the greatest implication for studying the Promise Keepers is offered by
Groothuis and Groothuis (1995) “perhaps we should pause to ponder what kind of church we have become, that Christian men now require their own books, magazines, rallies and support groups in order to find the encouragement to behave according to elementary principles of common decency and moral virtue. Is not the problem as startling as the size and success of its purported solution” (p. 19)? Ultimately, social movements must come to an end with varying degrees of success, but as Leland Griffin writes, “if the wheel forever turns, it is man [woman] who does the turning—forever striving, in an ‘imperfect world,’ for a world of perfection. And hence man [woman], the rhetorical animal, is saved: for salvation lies in the striving, the struggle itself” (in Stewart, Smith and Denton, 1994, p. 85).
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