



STATEMENTS

[MEET THE PRESIDENT](#)

[Office of the President Home](#) | [Statements Home](#)

[STATEMENTS](#)

[NEWSLETTER](#)

[MINISTRY FOCUS](#)



PROMISE KEEPERS

*A Statement from The Office of the President
The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
1333 South Kirkwood Road
St. Louis, Missouri 63122
United States of America*

I have been asked repeatedly to reflect on a movement within many evangelical or protestant churches called "Promise Keepers." Needless to say, it has caught the interest of a goodly number of men within our Synod as well. It seems that the Promise Keepers movement has "touched a nerve." It has identified a genuine and understandable need and has attempted to fill it. There is no doubt in my mind that our men need to receive assistance in their various callings in this life: to be men of integrity in their roles as husbands, fathers, employees or employers and all the rest. It is understandable that a movement that touches on these themes will be enthusiastically received by those who are seeking ways to improve themselves in these various areas of their lives.

But it is also clear to me, and many others in our Synod, that the Promise Keepers [PK] movement contains some areas of serious concern. The solutions PK proposes are not nearly as good as those that can be found elsewhere; namely, in the pure Word of God and in faithful and regular use of His Holy Sacraments as the Word and Sacraments are received in the local congregation.

I would like to share with you thoughts based on a letter I wrote to a

small group of laymen who wrote to tell me that they had attended a PK rally and now were meeting for regular Bible study. They wrote because they had heard there were some concerns being expressed about the PK movement by Lutheran pastors, and they wanted my opinion. It offered me a good opportunity to put down some of my thoughts about the movement. The PK movement has swept across a number of different Protestant denominations, including a number of LCMS men.

All one has to do is look to the horrendous problems of absent fathers in the families of our nation to realize how important it is that we emphasize as a Synod once more the duties and responsibilities that men have as fathers and husbands. Men in our congregations who are led to a deeper desire for knowledge of God's Word through the PK movement are to be encouraged in their desire to be more strongly in the Word of God and prayer, and support for one another.

There are, however, a number of very significant concerns with the PK movement. First of all, it is important to recognize that PK is rooted in the revival and pentecostal movements of the 19th and early 20th century. To illustrate the connection of PK with the charismatic movement, one need only notice that the official magazine of the PK movement is published by the same company that produces the popular charismatic magazine titled Charisma. Because the PK movement is rooted in revivalism and Pentecostalism, it carries with it the theological errors associated with these particular movements.

The PK movement tends to accept the notion that there is a "generic" sort of Christianity to which the various denominations add their particular emphases, sort of like a "base" of paint to which various colors are added to give the paint the particular color desired.

Overlooking theological differences is not an option for the faithful man of God. Recognizing them and realizing that in this life we may have to separate over them is a responsible choice, as opposed to simply "agreeing to disagree" and then neglecting these divisive issues. Until we are led by God's Spirit to agree on these various issues on the basis of agreement about the teaching of Scripture, we may not express a oneness which does not yet exist.

Because the PK movement tends to downplay differences it has considerable problems properly articulating what the Scriptures teach concerning, among other things, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, the proper understanding of justification and sanctification, the doctrines of infant baptism, Holy Communion and so forth. Promise Keepers is not at all clear on these subjects. As the rallies and the publications of PK reveal, they are attempting to offer a doctrinal system for these things, and thus wander into significant and important errors not to be taken lightly or overlooked.

It is especially important that both our pastors and laypeople recognize that PK obscures the Gospel through its confusion of Law and Gospel and its misunderstanding of the relationship of the doctrine of justification with the doctrine of sanctification. Instead of holding high Jesus Christ and His perfect righteousness for us, PK puts more emphasis on a certain life-style as its central and most important emphasis. To build a foundation for Christian living on the basis of a human decision to follow a list of human promises, is putting the foundation for our walk with the Lord on sinking sand, rather than on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ. The predominance of teaching in the PK movement is law. The PK movement does not recognize that the main purpose of God's law is to show us our sins and to drive us to Christ. On this point, I found one of our pastor's comments about PK to be especially helpful. He wrote to his congregation about PK and said, in part:

"To the extent that moralistic teaching tells me, demands of me, to 'shape up,' the more I try and attempt to do so, the more I am going to realize that as a sinner I cannot. My only hope is the Gospel. It alone heartens me, for it announces the good news that I am forgiven my failures. It points me to the cross of my Savior. It assures me that my integrity as a son of God is not to be found in my works or performance or promises, but solely in the grace of my loving God revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for me and works in me that which I cannot do (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21a)."

There is another key point that needs to be made. The Gospel is brought to us by the Holy Spirit as He works in our lives through the very concrete realities of preaching, teaching, hearing, reading and studying God's Word; through the Holy Baptism given to us; through the absolution pronounced by our pastor; and through the very body and blood of our Lord which we receive in the Lord's Supper. The PK movement is steering men from the means appointed by God to draw us closer to Himself. And this is just one more important doctrinal concern with the PK movement.

Rather than being grounded in the Lord's very real and concrete ways of bringing us into relationship with Himself, it would be my observation that the PK movement is based, in large part, on emotion. There is little in this life that can equal the intensity of emotion one can feel at a huge rally, where there are thousands of other people all cheering and chanting. Anyone who has ever attended a very exciting sporting event, when the home team is winning, can recognize how powerful the emotions can run in a huge group setting like that. Just think what it must be like when thousands of men are gathered, cheering together for Jesus Christ. The emotional euphoria that results is powerful. This explains in large part the appeal of a PK rally. It also explains why it is all too easy to overlook the significant doctrinal problems with the PK

movement when this powerful emotional impact overpowers careful reflection on the theology being conveyed.

It is clear to me that the men of our Synod need the sort of opportunities that are promoted by the PK movement, such as developing friendships with fellow men of faith, studying the Word carefully, renewing their commitments to family and their other responsibilities. I believe that instead of simply promoting the PK movement, it would be better for us to offer some good alternatives. It would be better for us to say, "Here is some good, but here is something much better." I have in mind here the efforts I am learning about in some of the districts of our Synod to offer a better approach. I would be happy to put you in contact with pastors who are working to offer an alternative to PK for the men in their congregations. Just write me here at the International Center and I will send you further information.

I recognize that there are a variety of opinions within our Synod on PK, and I am sure that the discussion will continue. I am confident that our pastors, and our faithful laity, will continue to do more than simply overlook the theological difficulties with the PK movement. Instead, we can use the PK movement as a good opportunity to do very high quality teaching in our congregations. We can also use this as an opportunity to reach out to the men of our congregations hungering for a deeper life of Christian faith. May God continue to bless our Synod as we discuss and think about the PK movement.

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