

PROMISE KEEPERS: “Encountering” Guys At Risk

Enthusiasm is mounting for this new men's ministry. But, there are some deeply disturbing aspects...

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Across the country, throughout every denomination, tens of thousands of men are coming to a major meeting extravaganzas to learn how to be better husbands and fathers. They come away from these events with rave reviews, testimonies of changed lives, and renewed faith. Promise Keepers was founded in 1990 by former University of Colorado football coach, Bill McCartney. The stated purpose is to unite men in the Christian faith.

This new ministry is growing rapidly, partially because men are aggressively recruiting other men at the local church level. Its strong emphasis on experiential faith, which pumps men up with positive experiences, and which does not seem on the surface to contradict the Word of God, also contributes to its phenomenal success.

However, several critical reviews of Promise Keepers have brought to light some serious biblical flaws in the Promise Keepers model. After examining these reviews we found the criticisms to have merit. One aspect in particular grabbed our attention: the use of an encounter group format. We decided to review the materials for ourselves.

A method of follow up with the men who have attended Promise Keeper mega-rallies is an 8-week encounter group session based on *The Promise Keepers Study Guide* designed for small groups of men. This study guide is based on the book *The Masculine Journey: Understanding the Six Stages of Manhood* by Robert Hicks and Dietrich Gruen, published by NavPress [we looked at the first printing, which is still in circulation, ed.].

Why examine a study guide? Because the contents provide insight into the philosophy and theology of Promise Keepers. The *Study Guide* is currently in use across the country. It was offered for sale by Dr. Dobson's Focus on the Family.

Men are **not** required to read the original book by Robert Hicks in order to go through the 8-week course. As a result, many men will be exposed to Hick's ideas by attending the study. The *Study Guide* is neither a group counseling workbook, nor a Bible study. Rather, the program is modeled after the largely discredited 1970s encounter group movement.

The Encounter Group Model

The encounter group is a semi-structured group that falls within the psychological realm for the purpose of “getting in touch with one's feelings.” Encounter groups are short-term, intensive sessions, usually managed by trained leaders, which consist of exercises designed to explore and unmask inner feelings. They provide an open atmosphere for re-defining the self and exploring new values and behaviors. The encounter group setting is supposed to provide a totally non-judgmental environment, where the individual would be accepted as he or she is, regardless of their background or psychological “baggage.” In this contrived environment, experience is elevated above all else, and moral absolutes are perceived as a hindrance to growth.

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At the height of their popularity encounter groups were widely criticized by the psychological community for a number of reasons. They did not provide the structured accountability and stability of longer-term group counseling sessions. They were notorious for exposing people to great "psychological risk" by creating inner conflict, new self-awareness, and exposing some very raw feelings. These groups simply were not equipped to deal with helping participants make the transition back to their normal lives, and as a consequence many people made rash decisions, became quite depressed, or found their values radically altered. The ultimate demise in popularity of encounter groups had to do with the negative after-effects, measured in terms of devastation on people's lives.

Unfortunately, Promise Keepers has revived the faulty encounter group structure in the Hicks *Study Guide*. The men are put through various recognizable encounter group stages that strongly resemble the "Serendipity Workshops" that were popularized by Lyman Coleman during the 1970s and '80s, which were a Christianized version of encounter groups mixed in with some Bible study.

Coleman began his groups with what he called "Can Openers" to break down psychological barriers. This was followed by "Scripture Happenings," in which some biblical topic was introduced and discussed in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner; then "Scripture Heavies," where the group examined a topic at deeper personal level; and concluded with "Growth Events," a structured time for the group participants to bare their soul, an experience that was supposed to be cathartic.

Promise Keepers follows this same style format. Each week the *Study Guide* begins with a study of the issues by reviewing the contents of Hicks' book. The group action begins when men begin "Exploring the Issues With Other Men." During this phase, interpersonal barriers and private inhibitions are broken down in systematic fashion to encourage men to share feelings, attitudes and opinions with one another. Characteristic of the encounter group format, there are no rights and wrongs. Instead there are a series of open-ended questions, sometimes accompanied by multiple choice answers.

Men "At Risk"

The text of the *Study Guide* assumes that most men are leading dysfunctional, sinful or very worldly Christian lives. There is little acknowledgment or affirmation of the men who lead holy lives. As a consequence these men may find themselves feeling quite "abnormal" in the group. In fact, so rare are the biblical or godly alternatives offered, that one can surmise that the *Study Guide* is built upon the premise that all men are "at risk" or "dysfunctional." According to the dynamics of group interaction, men who are not strong or mature in their faith may begin to feel pressured to be one of the "guys."

Assuming that the study is for new converts, or evangelistic in purpose, also results in a dead-end. This is because the *Study Guide* does not at any time give a clear presentation of the Gospel, nor does it contain scriptural material commonly associated with the discipleship of new converts.

Surprisingly, there is seldom a truly biblical alternative offered in the potential answers. For example, a question (#11, page 36) about the effects of pornography on men's lives provides no answer for men who never participated in this sin; nor is there an answer that indicates that a man has repented from this sin. In fact, there is not even a mention that this *is* sin! In this question, men could choose to answer "other" at the end of the list of possible answers. But,

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if this were a Bible study designed to encourage men to lead holy lives, why not include the biblical answers on the list to set the standard and serve as the ultimate positive model?

The open-ended or multiple choice question format is essentially a values clarification exercise. Some elements of it are designed to create **cognitive dissonance**, a condition where one's feelings, values, beliefs and behaviors become disoriented and mixed up. Cognitive dissonance is a primary tool of dialectics, and is often applied to education or psychology for the purpose of changing one's belief system. This moves one away from absolute Truth to subjective realities.

The *Study Guide* asserts that it is based on the psychological model of Daniel Levinson's book *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. Levinson's model provides a "developmental framework for understanding men..." (p. 8). Levinson borrows heavily from other psychological and sociological theories which promote the idea of developmental growth stages ("passages") in both children and adults.

The Promise Keepers developmental "journey" includes times of "*separation* from the past, *initiation* to something new, *transition* from one place to the other, and temporary *confusion*" (p. 8). These stages are a good description of the process of cognitive dissonance. This raises a number of questions about the intentions and purposes of the activities in the *Study Guide*. If the exercises were designed to solidify men in the absolutes of scriptural Truth there would be no need to go through this orchestrated process of psychological disruption. "*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.*" (1 Cor. 14:33)

Robert Hicks has come up with his own theory of six developmental stages to describe the male journey. It is a re-hash of the psychological theories of human development, only applied exclusively to men. Hicks' stages are couched in biblical terms, using Hebrew words and examples of biblical characters. However, he also borrows heavily from Freudian and Jungian psychology, and a host of New Age men's movement authors, to give added credence to his theoretical "normative" male experience.

Throughout the *Study Guide*, men are repeatedly encouraged to do further study in the men's movement, which Hicks believes the church needs to replicate. The men also study biblical characters who purportedly manifest a particular stage of development. This occurs during the third phase of each session, which is the closest the *Study Guide* comes to being a Bible study. But some men may object to the strange, quirky, and somewhat unseemly new interpretations of familiar Bible stories. Hicks must go through exegetical gymnastics in order to arrive at his bizarre conclusions. For example:

The biblical patriarch Jacob epitomizes the wounded male. Jacob illustrates a young man having been severely wounded by a dysfunctional family system. For background information, skim Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-33:20. (p. 54)

Breaking Down Inhibitions

During the last phase of each session, "Bringing it Home to Yourself and Other Men," the men are guided into deep introspection and sharing. Again, borrowing heavily from the encounter group strategies, the *Study Guide* drops the men off at this point, leaving them with their souls bared. In this condition, men are referred to read further materials on the secular men's movement, do more Bible study, or think about topics that will be brought up during the next session. By this time, natural modesty and inhibitions have been broken down through the use of guided questions, and there is great potential to stay this way out of peer group pressure, to "let it all hang out" throughout the duration of the study course.

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An overview of each of the eight sessions in the *Study Guide* provide a good look at how the encounter group format is being implemented. In the **first** session, the *Study Guide* includes an "ice breaker" exercise called "People Bingo." Lyman Coleman used a similar exercise during the '70s. This activity requires one to interview (get to know) other people in the room by asking them questions that appear on a grid. When one has filled out five names across or down, they shout "Bingo!"

The very first question on the grid is: "Has had sex within the last week (with wife)." Other questions have to do with being abused as a child, being arrested, activity in the men's movement, etc. This exercise forces men to reveal private details about their lives, some of which should never be anyone else's business.

The fact that men are asked to discuss their marital sexual relationship, for example, demonstrates the philosophy of Robert Hicks, who believes that men need to bond with other men more closely and be more accountable to one another. There is no biblical justification anywhere in the Scriptures to validate this activity, but rather the Bible makes it clear that marriage is holy, exclusive and intimate.

Many men's wives would be very hurt to realize that this information had been divulged to a group of other men. It is reminiscent of high school locker room activity, and the first clue that more of this will follow. This question was dropped in later printings, but its substitute asks men whether they wear boxers or briefs, another stab at privacy and modesty.

Locker Room Vulgarities

Hicks orients himself around the concept of men as "noble savage" (which he refers to as *Adam*), a characterization anthropologist/humanist Margaret Mead gave primitive tribes. Even saints are savages, claims Hicks. Men are put through a guided workshop on how to get in touch with their "savage" self.

This **second** session could be a golden opportunity to lead men to Jesus Christ, who forgives them their sins. But, there is an odd mixture of facetious answers mixed in with more sobering truth so that the Truth contained in the Scriptures is blurred at best. For example:

Q: When you look in the mirror, do you see a *saint* or a *savage*?

A: Depends on how recently I've shaved or what shape my body is in. (p. 23)

In fact, Promise Keepers is so ecumenical and non-exclusive that it is entirely feasible that there may be **no** saved men in the group.

This open invitation to both the saved and the non-saved takes a turn for the worse by the **third** session. Because Hicks does not differentiate between the two, and because all men are welcome, including the non-practicing (but not necessarily repentant) homosexual, this session is the most potentially volatile and dangerous.

It is also vulgar. Hicks states that the second stage of a man's journey is *Phallic*. The focus on male genitalia in this chapter goes beyond the biblical, straight into the New Age. Men have a "deep compulsion to worship with our phallus," (p. 29) states Hicks. Discussing this "strange power of the male phallus" (p. 35), especially in the context of male rites of initiation, is overtly pagan and not even remotely Christian.

Inviting men to explore their sexual fantasies and reveal secrets about their sexual thoughts and behavior in the values-free context of an encounter group session is playing with fire. There are

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no guidelines, no rules, no taboo topics. Unless there are a few godly men in the group who impose restraints, this session will likely be titillating, and could easily entice weak men, who are not firm in their faith (if they have a Christian faith), to sin. The men's locker room mentality is running at full tilt during this session.

Incidentally, there are no "coaches" monitoring this locker room. The *Study Guide* has a minimal section on leadership training which encourages passing leadership around from session to session. In this vacuum of direction, training and accountability one can only wonder how far out of control some of these sessions could go.

Rites of Initiation

The **fourth** group session discusses Hicks' *Warrior* stage of a man's life. Certain assumptions are presented as fact: **all** men that they must prove their manhood by winning battles at home, work or play. Hicks asks, "What about the growing men's movement could help such men?" (p 42) His narrowly-focused answers include such things as beating drums on warrior weekends and "recalling good warrior myths" (p. 42-43).

It seems no coincidence that the secular men's movement can be characterized by the same lack of restraint and morals that were part of the 1970s encounter group movement. The men's movement has been widely publicized as part of the New Age movement. It encourages men to get back to nature, back to primitive and tribal spirituality by performing "getting in touch with self" experiential activities known as rites. Hardly a Biblical model!

A good Biblical model for men to emulate can be found in 1 Tim. 3: "*blameless... vigilant, sober, of good behavior...*"

During session **five**, the men discover they need to experience the *Wounded* male on their journey. Woundedness is also defined in terms of male rites of initiation in primitive societies, where the flesh was physically mutilated. Hicks places circumcision in this category! This totally discounts and trivializes the covenant God made with Abraham. Woundedness is also a "death experience" for men, and there is an almost macabre focus on death during this session.

Hicks does not differentiate between wounding that is caused by sinful behavior (such as divorce or drug addictions) and wounding that came about through no fault of a man's, such as job loss. This proves to be significant later on, because in the last session men are put through rites of affirmation where their wounding experience is "recognized, praised and awarded" (p. 52). A quote from Robert Bly's book *Iron John* at the end of this chapter sums up this session well: "*No one gets to adulthood without a wound.*"

The peer pressure is on. The more wounds a man has, and the more he bares his soul about it, the more accolades and affirmations he will receive. The encounter group session reaches a peak at this point. There is open emotional baggage floating around uncontrollably everywhere. In encounter group philosophy this is supposed to be terrific. It means that you have a good group going.

Emotions still hang raw in session **six**. Men who lead holy, normal, happy lives with their spouses and families will likely feel at odds with the "mature" man of Hicks world. Hicks' mature man has just been through the wounded wringer and is now carefully hanging out to dry. Men who haven't been through the wringer experience won't relate, and could easily feel inadequate under the intense scrutiny of their encounter peer group. The mature man will be given his

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stripes and badges for coming through it all, being a survivor. Men who chose to be obedient to God may not be so rewarded. They may not have earned their stripes or been "at risk" enough.

Some men may make the irrational decision at this point that they need to purposefully become "wounded" in order to become a real man. Committing adultery (blandly referred to as "sexual indiscretion" p. 82) is one way that a man can become wounded. A tragic story appears in a letter to the editor in the Dec. 1994 *PsychoHeresy Awareness Letter*, p. 6:

I recently talked to a Christian man who said that his brother read Hicks' book. When completed, his brother felt 'he needed to develop a deeper masculinity' and to go back and experience being a 'wounded warrior.' To be properly 'wounded' he proceeded to commit adultery. He had never done such a thing before. Hicks's book was a major influence on him.

This "wounding" philosophy disdains the cross and disregards the work of the Holy Spirit in the regenerate man: "*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*" (Is. 53:5) The only wounds that make any difference for eternity are the wounds that Christ suffered for our salvation.

In session **seven**, we see the culmination of Hick's pagan-like vision for men: man as *Sage* or mentor. The biblical term describing the office of elder is seldom used, and there is only a remote possibility that a man's "mentor" could be his own father. Fathers are abusive, mothers are over-protective, wives are either domineering or sex objects, and children cause problems according to Hick's caricatures throughout the *Study Guide*. There is a careful step-by-step series of questions in this section that could lead every man to feel that is he severely lacking unless he has this mentor figure in his life. But there are few cautions about choosing a godly man for a mentor.

Session **eight** recreates the stages of cognitive dissonance that have been going on since session one. The solution? Instituting "rites of passage" for men in the church, an idea borrowed from pagan cultures where young men had to undergo a physically painful ceremony (sometimes accompanied by mutilation) in order to become a man.

The encounter group is then led through an affirmation ceremony which is designed to resolve the inner conflicts and assuage the dangling emotions. Men are led through this ceremony one step at a time and then given "awards" for the issues they have brought up over the time. It is at this stage that Hicks has successfully broken down enough barriers that this "rite of initiation" or "rite of passage" ritual seems "normative" for men in the church. It probably feels good emotionally for the men involved, who still may be hurting from exposing their inner selves during the preceding weeks.

Like the encounter group movement of the '70s, the ending affirmation ceremony is shallow and short, the study series is over, and men must return to their real lives and problems. Encounter groups can leave people with emptiness and a sense of incompleteness. Some will sour and become bitter because of the artificial sincerity and caring that was manifest for such a brief period of time in their lives. Many men will likely feel they need counseling. There may be serious repercussions on their wives and families, who may have no idea of what their men have been through.

Men "At Risk" of Damnation

There is a strong presumption of sin apparent throughout the *Study Guide*. Men who are on the fringes of the Christian faith will find that the study acknowledges and even affirms their sin.

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But, the *Study Guide* lacks a clear, rational mandate to snatch men away from the fire and pull them back to The Truth of the gospel. (Jude 23: "And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.")

Rather, the *Study Guide* leads men through potentially intensive, emotional turmoil and abandons them at the doorstep of rituals and ceremonies that mimic pagan religions and bear little or no resemblance to the Christian faith.

The encounter group format actually works against one of the stated goals of the program, which is to provide men with good role models. The best male role models will probably have excused themselves from further participation in this group after the first session because of its locker room mentality. ("Abstain from all appearance of evil." 1 Thess. 5:22)

Throughout the *Study Guide*, the concept of God's grace to overcome sin is significantly lacking. Also missing is the ministry of the local church, which is the true institution of biblical accountability designed for not just men, but for all believers.

Finally, despite the overall emphasis in the Promise Keepers ministry for breaking down racial and ethnic barriers, the *Study Guide* actually seems to reinforce and accentuate the differences between men and women. It is this emphasis, combined with the encounter group format, which gives rise to serious concerns about both content and purpose. Men would do well to examine the ministry in its entirety before endorsing it wholeheartedly.

*"For ye are **all** the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus ... there is **neither male nor female**: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Gal. 3:26, 28b)

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