THE DIRECTION OF
PROMISE KEEPERS

A RESPONSE TO PAPERS ON "RELIGION,
SPORTS AND MANHOOD"

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen

For the past few years, I have been a close watcher of the Promise Keepers movement. This has included assiduously reading each issue of New Man magazine from cover to cover, keeping up with other movement literature, and in a temporary journalistic capacity attending a Promise Keepers stadium rally (Pittsburgh, July 1996). This included an opportunity to ask questions at two press conferences featuring Promise Keepers media representatives and leaders such as Bill McCartney and Raleigh Washington. At the same time I was watching the stadium event from the exalted heights of the press booth I persuaded a woman friend and fellow Christian feminist from Pittsburgh to spend half a day as one of the thousands of volunteers needed to run such a weekend. As well as getting a substantial box lunch and a special blue volunteer’s T-shirt, she was able to take stock of the general atmosphere while taking orders for taped lectures inside one of the exhibition tents.

Much of my research is aimed at addressing a central question: Is Promise Keepers anti-feminist?

My position (you may be surprised to learn) is that the answer to that question, at least at this point in time, is “no”—but before explaining why, let me remind all of us of a point that should be obvious: Promise Keepers is a movement that began as Bill McCartney’s isolated dream in 1990; now, over six years later, it has drawn over a million men to twenty-two stadium rallies in one summer alone; it has a paid staff of over four hundred (some of whom are women, even in the upper managerial levels) and a budget of $115,000,000. Now a movement cannot expand that quickly without being something of a moving target, even to its own leaders. Indeed, so fast has Promise Keepers’ growth been that one of its regional directors commented in 1995: “If you don’t like change, don’t come to work for Promise Keepers.... We are creating policy before there’s a policy manual written down.”

So social scientists and historians alike need to be careful not to regard all of the movement’s earlier pronouncements as fixed in stone. Promise Keepers, as I learned from its

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media representatives, is acutely sensitive to the feedback it gets both from its own constituency and the world at large, and adjusts its message accordingly while maintaining the revivalist and evangelical theological focus with which it began. Indeed, it is largely as a result of tracking these adjustments that I am able to answer my question in the negative. This does not mean that reverse shifts might not occur in the future: It is still not clear whether Promise Keepers (to borrow a phrase from sociologist Judith Stacey) will in the end exemplify "patriarchy of the last gasp" (i.e., make rhetorical nods towards a theology of male headship while actually implementing feminist goals) or—as others have prognosticated—"patriarchy of the first backlash." But at this point in time, I lean toward the first diagnosis.

Why do I say this? First of all, to the question "Is Promise Keepers anti-feminist?" any careful analyst of feminism would reply that the answer depends on how you define feminism. My own observation is that most evangelical organizations—including Promise Keepers—who either remain silent about feminism or claim to be anti-feminist, are in many respects actually closet liberal feminists. It is not unusual to hear evangelical Christians say, in so many words, "I'm not a feminist, but..." and then go on to endorse a surprising number of issues from the liberal feminist agenda. Women's suffrage isn't even mentioned, because it is simply taken for granted (despite the fact that many evangelicals and fundamentalists opposed it on supposedly unchanging biblical grounds earlier in this century). But other items from classic liberal feminism are often cited: equal education for both sexes, equal pay for equal work, the belief that women are potentially as competent as men in running for political office (especially if they are conservative Republicans), and the belief that women can be as competent in the business world as men (especially if they are small business owners who want to get government off their backs).

Promise Keepers appears to be no different from other evangelical organizations in holding, however implicitly, to these liberal feminist assumptions, although clearly PK would draw the line at supporting homosexuality and abortion on demand. However, as many observers have noted, PK does have a residually ambivalent message about male headship: some of their writers and speakers have endorsed it; others have spoken out strongly for mutual submission and leadership between men and women in both home and church; still others have alternated between these two positions—sometimes in the very same speech or article. When I pointed out to the PK media representatives at Pittsburgh that this kind of incoherence was, at the very least, bad for their public relations, they looked distinctly uncomfortable, then informed the listening press representatives in carefully-measured tones that Promise Keepers does not have any position on male headship either in the church or the family. They went on to explain that they do not see male headship as a confessional issue and so have included nothing about it in their statement of faith.

Consequently, PK speakers and writers are free to reflect the same diversity of opinion on male headship as is seen in evangelicalism at large.

I did my best to point out that this agnostic stance was unsatisfactory for two reasons:

1. It means that PK's varied messages on male headship function like a projective test: men who are already disposed to gender equality will selectively retain that message when it is heard, but men who still believe in male headship will selectively take home the latter message. This, at the very least, breeds confusion—for PK men, but especially for the women who have to live with them after they get home from their weekend rallies.

2. To be consistent, PK would also have to acknowledge that racial reconciliation is not part of their statement of faith and that (as they themselves well know) there are plenty of Southern white males who believe that this too is something about which evangelicals can legitimately agree to disagree. But Promise Keepers "Seven Promises"—the document which presumes but goes beyond their statement of faith—makes racial reconciliation a non-optional stance, and one about which PK speakers do not mince words, even during rallies held in the American South. I asked the PK media representatives if this differential clarity on the issues of gender and race reflected an organizational belief that sexism is a less serious sin than racism. This they vehemently denied, even while they were unable to pinpoint what they intended to do about the discrepancy.

In spite of this equivocation (or perhaps because of it), I came away from the Pittsburgh weekend with the distinct impression that PK is trying to change its image as a gender-traditionalist organization, but to do it slowly and discreetly enough so as not to lose too many constituents. Since most evangelicals lack a formal church hierarchy for settling internal debates, change often comes simply by virtue of ceasing to talk about something that was previously held up as a sacred cow, and/or by slowly introducing an alternative position in an offhand and non-threatening manner.

Consider the following pieces of evidence:

1. During the 1996 Pittsburgh weekend (and perhaps others as well) Tony Evans (who has openly promoted female subordination) was given no platform to expound on marriage and family; rather, he gave the Friday night evangelistic sermon (and, I'm bound to add, did a good job of it, taking as his key text the parable of the prodigal son). My point is that PK's most notorious gender traditionalist seems to have been discreetly re-positioned so as to downplay that aspect of his teaching.

2. A recent issue of *New Man* magazine had an article on the history of the Salvation Army, whose prominently
displayed photo of William and Catherine Booth includes the bold-type comment that “historians recognize the Booths’ marriage and ministry as an equal partnership.” The same issue, on its regular page featuring “clips” or quotations from elsewhere includes, under the exhortation “Lift Her Up,” a prominently-displayed summary of research showing that the strongest marriages are ones in which each partner “encourages the other’s pursuit of their dreams — whether it’s becoming a doctor or learning to whistle wood,” adding that “people who know that their mate is behind their dreams are [also] more likely to actually accomplish those goals.” This, I’m bound to say, is more like what I’d expect to read in Priscilla Papers.

3. A final observation: I and my woman colleague in Pittsburgh took great pains to observe how the men at the rally interacted with the thousand or so women who circulated around both the infield and the outside tents as volunteers. Neither of us detected the least tendency to treat women as any kind of a polluting, inferior, or unwelcome presence. If anything, the men seemed delighted at the opportunity to practice the kind of Christian courtesy towards women being commended to them from the podium. Indeed, my colleague — whose initial stance toward the event was even more skeptical than mine — came away commenting that the only other time she’d felt so safe as a woman was when she’d once been in a gay bookstore.

Of course, chivalrous attitudes to women do not necessarily indicate feminist sensibilities — often quite the reverse. But here we need to remind ourselves that what counts as feminist also depends on the context in which women are operating. Most North American women do not have the educational and financial safety net that is routine in the lives of academic feminists. They must contend with a high risk of divorce, the resulting feminization of poverty, and a heavily sexualized culture of consumption which draws male resources away from households towards everything from pornography to spectator sports and substance abuse. Underneath its rhetoric of chivalry and noblesse oblige, Promise Keepers provides a supportive yet challenging environment in which — much as in a Twelve Step program — men can turn over a new leaf as they respond to its calls for sexual purity, fiscal responsibility, moderation in the pursuit of sports and other typically male activities, and attentiveness towards wives and children. The result may well be that even Promise Keepers who adopt a rhetoric of male headship end up acting functionally as gender egalitarians — which, I’m bound to say, is better than the opposite inconsistency (i.e., preaching a feminism you don’t practice, a common error among self-professed liberals.)

However, it would be even better if both the message and the behavior were consistently egalitarian. And, as I have argued, it does appear as if Promise Keepers may be gingerly moving towards that goal. In the meantime, I am reminded of a remark made to me many years before the advent of Promise Keepers by a young evangelical woman at a workshop where I was speaking about gender relations. “I have no problem,” she said, “submitting to a man who loves me as Christ loves the church. The problem is to find one.” Promise Keepers appears to care deeply about producing men who do love their wives “as Christ loves the church.” In time, I sincerely hope a full-blown rhetoric of mutual submission will follow.

1 Randall Balmer, “Keep the Faith and Go the Distance: Promise Keepers, Feminism, and the World of Sports.”
2 Scott Cormode, “Raise the Standard and Break Down the Walls: The Promise Keepers Movement and its Historical Forefathers.”
3 David Hackett, “Wild Men and Promise Keepers: Men and American Protestantism in Historical Perspective.”
4 These papers were presented at the AAR, North American Section, New Orleans, LA, Nov 1996.
8 Classic liberal feminism emphasizes human rationality, autonomy, and individual rights. It also maintains a strict (but degendered) separation of private and public life, and holds that reforms in law, custom, and education are sufficient to bring women into the societal and educational mainstream. While American evangelicals obviously reject the secularist and sexual libertarian aspects of liberal feminist thought, there is little evidence today that they educate their daughters differently from their sons, believe that women should stay at home at all stages of the family life cycle, or that men should always be the primary bread winners. To this extent they have assimilated the liberal feminist agenda while (usually) denying that they have done so. For a further discussion of these issues, see Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, et. al., After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
9 See Van Leeuwen, “Servanthood or Soft Patriarchy?” on page 32 of this issue for a more detailed analysis of this equivocation.
10 Balmer is, however, wrong to assert (p. 12) that “women are not allowed at Promise Keepers rallies.” They are not encouraged to come, for the reason Balmer cites (“The conferences are designed for specific men’s issues in the context of an all-male setting”). But according to PK media representatives at the July 1996 Pittsburgh press conference, PK does not track rally registrations by sex, but simply processes them on a first come, first served basis. Women — albeit very few — have registered for and attended both the regular weekend rallies (I saw a handful in the stands at Pittsburgh who were not in volunteer regalia, and thus presumably conference registrants) and also the February 1996 PK conference for pastors in Atlanta.