In 1992, well before the Christian men’s movement known as Promise Keepers became front-cover news for American journalists, Gloria Steinem—the founding editor of Ms. magazine—wrote the following:

Make no mistake about it: Women want a men’s movement. We are literally dying for it. If you doubt that, just listen to women’s desperate testimonies of hope that the men in our lives will become more nurturing towards children, more able to talk about emotions, less hooked on a spectrum of control that extends from not listening through to violence, and [that they will become] less repressive of their own human qualities that are called “feminine.” ... Perhaps the psychic leap of twenty years ago [when feminists announced that] women can do what men can do, must now be followed by [the announcement that] men can do what women can do.¹

In the years following Steinem’s exhortation, religiously-slanted men’s gatherings, such as Promise Keepers and the 1995 Million Man March, have caught the public’s eye. These are two recent additions to a North American men’s movement which now has almost as many faces as are found within feminism. It includes conservative voices who still regard the 1950’s middle-class version of family life as normative, or who feel that feminism has resulted in reverse discrimination against men in everything from job opportunities to child custody decisions. It includes men who wish to explore the more “feminine” emotions Gloria Steinem referred to, or who want to grieve the actual or psychological absence of father figures in their lives. And it includes self-consciously feminist men who campaign against pornography and male violence, and even run no-nonsense rehabilitation programs for men who abuse their partners.²

Where does the evangelically-oriented Promise Keepers movement fit into this picture? Why has it emerged at this time in North American history? What reactions has it received from cultural analysts, both secular and Christian? And how should it be evaluated by Christian women and men committed to mutual submission and the full use of women’s as well as men’s gifts in society, church, and home? The rest of this paper addresses these questions in turn.

A PROFILE OF PROMISE KEEPERS

The most public and media-covered feature of Promise Keepers is its two-day sports stadium rallies held annually throughout the United States. Beginning in 1991 with a single gathering of 4,200, the rallies expanded over six years to twenty-two weekends and over a million attendees. In the same time period, the organization’s paid staff more than doubled yearly to over four hundred, its budget rose to $115 million, and its branch offices expanded to include over 30 states and provinces.³ Indeed, sociologist David Blankenhorn, author of the 1995 best-seller Fatherless America, has characterized Promise Keepers as “the largest and most important men’s movement in the United States today.”⁴

Promise Keepers rallies are targeted to men. Women registrants are not turned away from stadium rallies but they are not encouraged to come, since the organization believes that men at least sometimes need an all-male space in order to come to terms with God. As of this writing women’s best options for attending are to obtain a press pass, to become a token woman speaker by marrying a Promise Keepers officer, or to go in disguise as a male. I have managed to take advantage of the first option (covering the 1996 Pittsburgh rally for the periodical Books & Culture), my husband questions the feasibility of the second, and the third has already been successfully attempted by a thirty-something Jewish lesbian, who reported it in Ms. magazine as a surprisingly positive experience.⁵ In addition to attending a rally and having discussions with men involved in the movement, I have consulted written sources—and of these there are plenty. They include materials issued or endorsed by the Promise Keepers movement itself, including books such as Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper and Go the Distance,⁶ the magazine New Man,⁷ reactions to the movement by the secular and religious press, and more academic analyses by students of rhetoric and of church history.⁸

By all accounts, the original moving force behind Promise Keepers—and its habit of conducting rallies in sports stadiums—is Bill McCartney, a former Catholic who is now a member of the charismatic Protestant Vineyard Fellowship, and erstwhile head football coach at the University of Colorado. McCartney’s own experience reflects many of the concerns expressed in the “seven promises” to which movement members commit themselves. For all its defects, organized sport is one
of the few North American institutions which is fairly successfully integrated by race, and McCartney's track record in this regard is impressive: He was the only Division I-A head coach to have equal numbers of black and white coaches working for him, and on resigning his post in 1995, he publicly protested (with the help of Jesse Jackson) the fact that the long-time assistant coach in line for his position was passed over for a less experienced white candidate.9

By contrast, there is a saying from Martin Luther King Jr. to the effect that eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most racially-segregated hour of the week in America. Hence McCartney's concern for promise #6 (“reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity”). Moreover, twenty-five percent of the organization's paid staff are people of color; it draws about half its rally speakers from the ranks of minorities, and its leaders repeatedly press the mostly-white rally attendees to reach out to minority men once they return home to form accountability groups (promise #2).

But the dark side of sport also took its toll on McCartney's pre-Promise Keepers life: his unmarried daughter gave birth to two children, each fathered by one of McCartney's varsity football players.10 In the process of producing a national championship college team he became, by his own admission, a workaholic absentee husband and father who expected his family's life to revolve around his professional priorities. Hence the concern for promise #3 (“practicing spiritual, moral, ethical and sexual purity”) and promise #4 (“building strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values”). The remaining promises (#1, 5, and 7) more specifically reflect the evangelical character of the organization. These call for “honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God's word,” “supporting the mission of the church—including honoring and praying for pastors” and “being obedient to the Great Commission” (to love God and neighbor) and the “Great Commission” (to evangelize and disciple all nations). They also help explain Promise Keepers' practice of having an altar call for conversion or re-commitment not at the end but near the beginning of a stadium rally, the promises being a second-stage call to more specific forms of sanctification at the end.

Some demographic statistics have been collected for Promise Keepers by the National Center for Fathering based in Shawnee, Kansas. These showed (as of 1995) that while 88 percent of rally attendees were married, 21 percent had been divorced, and close to 20 percent had parents who divorced. Attendees' median age was 35, and 37 percent were white. In terms of education, about a quarter have only a high school education, and almost that many have a technical or arts associate degree; however, close to 50 percent of attendees have a bachelor's degree or more. Over a quarter reported having become Christians after age 24, and fully a third attended Baptist or Southern Baptist churches. Fully half reported that their own fathers were largely absent while they were growing up.11

By all accounts, however, the real test of Promise Keepers' success is not the drawing power of the stadium weekends, but the staying power of the local accountability groups which men are sent home to form. There is a leadership seminar for those who have already attended the larger rallies, and in Promise Keepers' home state of Colorado graduates of these seminars work with men's groups in some 800 churches. But on a national scale these grass-roots accountability groups are too recent to have had any systematic evaluation research published on them—to see, for example, if they really do foster cross-racial fellowship, or if they strengthen—rather than compete with—local congregational life. What is not in question is that Promise Keepers has tapped into some very strongly-felt needs in a certain segment of North American men. Indeed, so fast has its growth been that one of its regional event managers has commented: "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." In the midst of such rapid growth, Promise Keepers president Randy Phillips reports that the group's core values and integrity are maintained only through "heroic commitment and prayer."12

NEW MAN MAGAZINE

Despite the lack of systematic research showing how Promise Keepers is working at the level of local groups, one can sense how the organization hopes to influence its members during the off-rally season by looking at its official magazine, an eight-times-a-year glossy called New Man. Begun in 1994, by mid-1996 its publisher (Strang Communications) reported a paid circulation of 300,000. In terms of content, the magazine has a regular column exegeting and applying the Promise Keepers' promises (e.g., how to be supportive of your local pastor, how to honor your wife) and others on health, finance, and women; this last rotates among female guest columnists, some of whom are wives of Promise Keepers officers. It has reviews of Christian male musicians and of male-authored evangelical books ranging in subject matter from light theology through self-help to fiction. It has practical columns giving tips on a wide range of topics, from leading a men's group, to monitoring children's T.V. viewing, to losing weight and fighting off incipient baldness. Its feature articles include profiles of men who are Christian athletes, evangelists, missionaries and entrepreneurs; advisory articles on sexuality, marriage and childcare; and the pursuit of moderation in sports and Internet surfing; stories of individual conversion or struggles in sanctification; and advice on the cultivation of Christian virtues such as courage, honesty, and perseverance.

And of course, there are the inevitable advertisements—for books, videos, records, conferences, preferred risk insurance, Christian holiday ranches, Christian counseling services, Christian real estate and travel agents, and Christian-logoed luggage, jewelry, bank checks, date books, stationery, pens, coffee mugs, T-shirts, and neck ties. One can, it appears, be a
new Christian man without ceasing to be a patriotic American consumer. In the first two years of New Man, ads for such goods and services well outnumbered those for seminary training, missions organizations, relief agencies and church teaching resources, and much of Promise Keepers’ budget comes from the sale of similar items at its stadium rallies.

In rhetorical tone, 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 maleness, and to express tenderness and accessibility to children, rather than stereotypically male emotional remoteness and authoritarianism. All this is laced with a kind of quaint, down-home humor: a photograph of the vanity plate on super-preacher Chuck Swindoll’s Harley-Davidson motorcycle (which reads: SERMON8R), a bumper sticker urging readers to “Save the Males,” a light-hearted commentary on the up side of going bald (“Remember that being bald is like heaven—bright, shining, and no parting there”).

New Man thus is very different from the fundamentalist and evangelical magazines of the pre- and post-World War Two periods, recently analyzed by historian Margaret Bendroth in her book Fundamentalism and Gender. Given to titles like Bible Champion, Watchman, and The Sword of the Lord, these periodicals were characterized by an aggressively masculine rhetoric in which evangelism and the defense of scriptural inerrancy were frequently spoken of in starkly athletic and militaristic terms. Stereotypically feminine traits (such as gentleness, compromise, and emotional sensitivity) were seen as evidence that women were unfit for the rigors of Christian combat against unbelief and the incursions of modernist theology. Hence the boundary between the domestic (female) and public (male) spheres—and the traits said to be associated with each—was strictly observed and even elevated to the status of a biblical absolute, although this dichotomy is in fact historically recent, class-specific, and largely the product of bourgeois Victorian mores interacting with the economic challenges of the industrial revolution.

By contrast, Promise Keepers seems enthusiastically to have embraced the image of the “sensitive new age guy”—albeit with a distinctly evangelical slant. Such a man is more than just a good provider: he is friend, counselor, servant and enabler to his family, colleagues, and fellow Christians. He can, it seems, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. And while he may enjoy sports and be given to using military or even computer metaphors for his spiritual life, he does so with caution and moderation, having learned of the one-sidedness and even idolatry that these activities can breed in the male psyche. In many ways he seems to be embracing exactly the mandate set forth by Gloria Steinem—that of showing that “men can do what women can do”—while continuing to enjoy male fellowship in prototypically masculine settings.

WHY NOW? SOME FORCES BEHIND THE PROMISE KEEPERS MOVEMENT

Why should such a movement have arisen at this particular time? Promise Keepers, speaking through one of its own staff writers in New Man magazine, credits a mighty moving of God’s spirit, and expresses hope that history will prove this to have been the catalyst for a full-fledged evangelical revival. But as a Calvinist with a high view of the incarnational and historical character of Christianity, I am inclined to see God working with and through—not just in spite of—economic and social forces. I will mention three such forces which I think have converged to help bring about this particular parachurch movement: first, 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. We should note that the convergence of these factors is not entirely unique in North American history, including church history: a similar convergence of economic and cultural forces has prompted a sense of “masculinity in crisis” at various times in the past two centuries.

ECONOMIC INFUENCES

Consider first the economic upheavals of the late twentieth century. The “peace dividend” confidently anticipated when the cold war ended in the late 1980’s has not materialized. Instead, we have seen the opening up of a global economy, the expansion of multinational corporations, and the consequent flight of North American capital to cheaper labor markets. Added to this has been a massive technological shift—namely, the information revolution brought about by the development of computers—which has heightened the risk of unemployment for some and wage stagnation (or even decline) for many others, a risk compounded by the decreasing power of North American trade unions. While these changes have added to almost everyone’s insecurity, their effects are compounded for men in a society which 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.

Particularly vulnerable are middle-aged, middle-class white men, for as social psychologists keep reminding us, perceived deprivation is a relative concept: it depends on what one has had in the past and been led to expect for the future. So perhaps we should not be surprised that 84 percent of the attendees at Promise Keepers rallies are white, and that their median age is 38. In this respect, Promise Keepers is not unlike the secular, mythopoetic men’s movement spearheaded by Robert
Bly, whose "weekend warriors" (so labelled by men's studies scholars Michael Kimmel and Michael Kaufman) are over 90 percent white with a median age of over 40. Both movements represent, at least in part, "a cry for certainty about the meaning of manhood in a society where both men's power and rigid gender definitions are being challenged." 17

Church and social historians have noted parallels between today's economically-influenced "crisis in masculinity" and similar crises in the past. Prior to the Civil War, 90 percent of free men in the United States owned their own shop or farm; today, less than ten percent do. 18 In the patriarchally-driven frontier and antebellum periods family workplace, dwelling space, and childrearing place almost always coincided, giving men control over—and constant access to—their own land, their own labor, and the labor of other family members. With the advent of the industrial revolution, fewer and fewer men worked their own land or business, and more and more worked for other men in offices and factories—thus decreasing control over their own labor and their own families, whom they continued to rule in theory (and economically in their new role as sole breadwinners) but with whom they interacted less and less in practice. By now, even the identification of breadwinning with masculinity is under siege. Even middle class, intact nuclear families often need two adults in the waged workforce to survive economically, and although the wage gap between men and women is decreasing, close to half that decrease is attributable not to women's increased, but rather to men's decreased earning power since the 1970's. And so now, as at the beginning of the industrial revolution, men are pondering the meaning of masculinity, and searching for arenas in which to recover and/or reshape its definition.

**THE FEMINIST FACTOR**

Almost nothing is said—either positive or negative—about feminists or the feminist movement in Promise Keepers' assorted literature. And yet it is clear, as in the various secular expressions of the men's movement, that feminism is in large part what these men are responding to. Given the relational and dynamic character of gendered behavior—which is more like a dance than a set of fixed, parallel monologues—society cannot experience the challenge represented by three decades of feminist activity without men eventually having to come up with one or more serious responses. 19

I have already suggested a demographic parallel between the Promise Keepers movement and the mythopoetic wing of the secular men's movement. 20 In addition, both movements appeal to the same historical and psychological analysis of troubled manhood. Both agree that the industrial revolution was a significant turning point, because it took husbands and fathers out of the home and into an amoral, competitive marketplace. In the process they ceded to women (and their allies among the male clergy) almost the entire burden of "social reproduction"—that is, the nurturing of emotional health, personal morality, social cohesiveness, and the overall level of community virtue. 21 Both also agree that one result has been men's progressive loss of the ability and motivation to be involved in childrearing, except at one remove as breadwinners (and often not even that anymore). Psychologically, an additional result has been a chronic dearth of positive, hands-on male role models for boys and young men. Both movements propose to remedy this by creating all-male gatherings in which men can grieve over the absence of father figures in the past, and form mentoring relationships with other males to compensate for this loss.

But here the parallels end, for Promise Keepers largely differs in the way it relates these historical and psychological factors to male-female relationships. The mythopoetic men's movement has been criticized by feminists of both sexes for, in effect, "blaming the victims"—that is, women—for the current state of men's psyches. Having collaborated in maintaining a gendered dichotomy between domestic and public life, mythopoetic men (it is said) now turn around and blame women for being overly-salient in the lives of their sons, robbing them of access to their fathers and turning them into "soft," overly-feminized males. And although contemporary feminism in large part represents a protest against the very institution of the gendered public/private split, some mythopoetic male leaders continue to blame feminist women for their resulting feelings of masculine insecurity and disempowerment. 22

Promise Keepers departs from this rhetoric in three important ways. First, it sends a strongly evangelical message of personal repentance and conversion. If divorce, sexual irresponsibility, and father absence are running rampant in society, regardless of what historical forces might have contributed, it is individual men who must confess complicity and ask other family members for forgiveness—including forgiveness from their own fathers for harboring resentment and bitterness against them for their earlier absence. "We've been too proud to cry out to God and to say we need help," proclaimed one evangelist at a 1994 rally in Boulder. "We're not asking men to go back with an iron fist," says Promise Keepers president Randy Phillips. "We're asking them to go back on their knees, with a spirit of service and respect for their wives and families." 23 And far from blaming Christian women for men's current role confusion, Promise Keepers board member Gary Oliver praises them for keeping important societal institutions functioning, and calls on men to help shoulder the load:

Let's face it: if it weren't for women, there would be no prayer in many churches, missionaries would not get ongoing support, and there would be a lot fewer Bible studies. There has definitely been a vacuum of men doing what God has called them to do in the church. 24

Promise Keepers thus project an image of being "weekend weepers," not "weekend warriors."
Secondly, as we have already seen, despite their use of military and athletic metaphors, Promise Keepers are not generally bent on recovering the kind of traditional masculinity ambiguously celebrated both by the mythopoetic men’s movement and by their own fundamentalist forefathers. On the contrary, Promise Keepers appropriates the feminist critique of stereotypical masculinity and re-clothes it in a biblical theology of true manhood. Thus Promise Keepers are enjoined to reject the profile of the “friendless American male” (self-reliant, unfeeling, competitive, distant from both women and other men) and instead 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. 24

Women journalists covering Promise Keepers rallies have confirmed this message of personal responsibility and emotional openness. “As a woman, I didn’t hear anything particularly alarming,” said Lois Rabey who covered a 1993 rally from the press box for a Christian women’s magazine. “Frankly, I felt the men were finally doing what Christian women have been doing for a long time.” 25 And Donna Minkowitz, the reporter for Ms. magazine who attended a 1995 rally in Florida disguised as a teenage boy, made the following observations:

Over and over, men are urged to show their emotions, to let go of their anger, to re-evaluate how they treat the women in their lives. Six or eight of the major speakers emphasize that 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. I’m struck by how close it all sounds to feminism… In a society where men are trained to reject and humiliate one another, it’s no wonder that simply getting close to other men can feel divine. Watching these men blossom, I begin to wonder if the key to men not oppressing women is for them to stop oppressing the woman inside [themselves]. 26

Minkowitz realizes that fellow feminists “may scoff at the Promise Keepers’ emphasis on men’s personal healing and self-growth,” focussed as they are on institutional rather than individual explanations of oppression. “But,” she continues, “I don’t see how society can change in the ways we want it to if men have no support to start acting less like “men” and more like caring, loving, ethical, and non-dominating human beings… [A]part from a few lonely male activists, [feminist] progressives have never been able to mobilize men for this sort of healing and change. The Promise Keepers have stepped into this vacuum.” 27

Todd Yonkman, a student of church history at the University of Chicago Divinity School, maintained a more skeptical distance when he attended a 1994 rally, but he concedes that:

Promise Keepers’ men’s groups go quite a way beyond secular men’s groups. Their use of feminist critiques of male communication have the potential of transforming the competitive way that men relate to each other, and their evangelical zeal will not allow them to sit in a circle, cry to each other and pat each other on the back. Christlikeness demands action on behalf of the kingdom of God to bring others into community. 28

INDIVIDUALISM RECONSIDERED

In collectivist societies, which are “responsibility oriented,” individuals act mainly to advance the honor and welfare of the group, be it family, tribe, or nation. In individualist societies, which are “rights oriented,” it is assumed that groups and institutions exist largely to aid the personal development of individuals. 29 For the past several decades, an assumption of North American individualism has been that focussing on personal needs and desires will only enhance the well-being of society as a whole. Thirty years later, we are not so sure. By 1992, AIDS had become the leading killer of American men between the ages of 25 and 44, and the fourth highest among similar-aged women. 30 Between 1960 and 1990, the American divorce rate more than doubled, so that we can now expect fully 40 percent of American children to experience the divorce of their parents. Births outside of marriage went from 5 to almost 30 percent of all births, and among inner city African-Americans, the rate in the mid-1990’s climbed to 68 percent. At the same time, almost a third of African American men ages 20 to 29 were in jail, in prison, on parole, or on probation. The rate of violent crimes among teenage white males doubled between 1985 and 1994, and increased sixfold among black male teenagers. Almost a million and a half abortions are now performed annually, and adolescents become sexually active at ever-earlier ages, so that by the mid-1990’s one in four fourteen-year-olds reported having experienced intercourse. 31

Without taking a formal position on the relative responsibilities of individuals and government in the promotion of just and stable communities, Promise Keepers has in practice chosen to emphasize the role of changed individuals, working together in a visionary parachurch organization, as a vital component of social transformation. Their calls for male sexual purity—rejecting pornography, maintaining chastity before and fidelity within marriage—are based on both creation theology and evangelistic vision. Although sexual discipline may seem difficult, Promise Keepers writers insist that God calls people to it with their own and society’s best interests at heart; moreover, “to the extent that we live in sexual purity, we reflect for the whole world that God is at work within us, shaping our desires, choices, and actions with more than just hormones.” 32 Concern is expressed for the latchkey child neglected by workaholic parents, and for the woman who “supported her
husband through college ... only to have him divorce her in favor of a younger plaything. 33 Christian men are urged to become rededicated “churchmen,” that is, active leaders in the church’s teaching, evangelistic, and social service missions, rather than leaving these tasks disproportionately to women, or becoming fickle “church hoppers” constantly looking for novel forms of Sunday morning entertainment. 34 In all these ways, Promise Keepers has appropriated the general societal reaction against the excesses of individualism and proffered religious, psychological, and organizational resources to bring men back into a more communitarian mindset.

SKEPTICAL VOICES: CRITICISMS FROM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

But Promise Keepers is not without its critics, and some of its church-based criticism can be understood in terms of the historic tension in evangelical circles between revivalist and separatist impulses. 35 Those of a revivalist bent—and Promise Keepers is nothing if not revivalist—are concerned mainly with preaching the gospel to the unconverted and renewing commitment among the previously-converted. Revivalism is highly experiential in tone, focusing on the need for a personal (and publicly declared) encounter with God. Eager to reach as many people as possible, revivalists tend to focus on the basics of the Evangelical message (personal repentance, salvation by faith alone, self-discipline and service as a witness to God’s transforming power), and to tolerate some ambiguity on other issues. “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity” might well be the motto of the revivalist, and this helps to explain Promise Keepers’ ecumenical outreach, its concern to make divorced men and single fathers feel affirmed and supported, and indeed, some of its contradictory pronouncements on gender relations.

A PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS, OR JUST SOME?

However, the boundary between doctrinal essentials and non-essentials is a matter of debate in biblically-focussed churches, and those of a separatist bent tend to have a much longer list of essential markers of a true church. This longer and more complex list (which includes matters of church order, family structure, and interaction with society at large) then inclines them towards fundamentalism—a kind of works righteousness of intellectual assent in which the capacity to state sound doctrine (based on literalist readings of the Bible) overshadows any religious experience as a source of authority. 36 Moreover, revivalists generally affirm the historic holiness and Pentecostal movements’ belief that God distributes spiritual gifts to all groups without favor—young and old, men and women, ordained and unordained. Separatist fundamentalists, by contrast, examine the Pauline epistles for minute (and presumed to be enduring) rules of church order, then go on to create a hierarchy of religious authority which almost always features male elders and pastors at the top.

Thus G.I. Williamson writes in the monthly magazine of the conservative Orthodox Presbyterian Church that Promise Keepers “usurps the prerogatives that our Lord has given only to his church” by encouraging mere laymen to help each other be accountable instead of appealing to their church elders, whom “God himself has provided...to watch over the flock.” He also criticizes the ecumenical character of the Promise Keepers rallies, where Evangelicals rub shoulders with Catholics, Mormons, and members of “apostate denominations.” Is it God’s will, he asks rhetorically, “that we should worship and pray with idolaters?” He asserts that “nowhere in the Word of God do we find authorization for a special movement for men only,” and concludes that because of its careless doctrinal boundaries and parachurch character Promise Keepers “will—in the end—do more harm than good.” 37

Williamson’s criticism of Promise Keepers as a populist men’s organization is clearly an attempt to shore up the ecclesiastical authority of a particular, elite group of men—namely, ordained pastors and elders in conservative churches. But the same concern is expressed by more moderate Evangelicals for very different reasons. Writing in another Reformed periodical known for its social justice concerns, Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis point out that there is nothing in Promise Keepers’ seven promises (e.g., evangelism, mutual accountability, support of the church, racial reconciliation) that does not apply equally to all Christian believers. Thus, to the extent that the seven promises are held up as a description of godly masculinity, the promises imply that there is something distinctively masculine about godliness ... Defining masculinity as though it were the same thing as godliness can lead to a devaluation of femininity. If Christian men are like Christ not simply because they are Christians, but also because they are men, then men are simply more Christlike than women. 38

This confusion is reinforced, they add, by “the PK habit of equivocating between the generic and gender-specific meanings of terms such as man, men, and sons.” 39 Thus, even a conservative Bible translation such as the New International Version, renders Ephesians 4:24 as “Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness
and holiness.” Yet the editors of New Man cite the older King James translation of the verse (“... that ye put on the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness”) as the inspiration for the magazine’s name, ignoring the clear generic intent of the original Greek and thereby subtly conflating manliness with Godliness.

And when a Promise Keepers speaker asserts that “true manhood” should be gleaned from the example of Jesus, who “could walk in and clear out a corrupt temple,” there is the underlying suggestion—whether intended or not—that there are certain aspects of Jesus that Christian women cannot properly model.

Fuller Seminary theologian Lewis Smedes reinforces the Groothuis’ concern: “[T]he Bible is mainly interested in the moral and spiritual qualities of a human being,” he stated in a 1995 interview for Christianity Today. “That which is important about Jesus ... is not his modeling of maleness but his modeling of humanity.” All three critics are concerned that a subtle rhetoric of “muscular Christianity” (present, as we have noted, in more blatant forms during other periods in church history characterized by masculine identity crisis) is again being used to attract men by assuring them of their essential difference from—and spiritual superiority to—women, despite Promise Keepers’ emphasis on male humility and emotional vulnerability. At the very least, the men of Promise Keepers—like men in general—are faced with conflicting expectations: they “must somehow navigate between being lions and lambs.”

Even Promise Keepers’ emphasis on men’s personal repentance might be construed as a declaration of men’s greater importance for the building of God’s kingdom and a renewed society. If the problems of our time—as Promise Keepers speakers often assert—are due to men’s neglect of God’s calling, does this mean (the Groothuis’ ask) that “the moral and social order [is] falling apart for lack of the spiritual leadership that only men can adequately provide?”

Or are things degenerating simply because men have not been carrying their share of the load, having left family, church, and social responsibilities entirely to women (many of whom have been wearing themselves out doing double duty)? The former view entails a hierarchy of power drawn along lines of gender; the latter advocates a mutual, cooperative effort in which each person utilizes his or her gifts in service to God and others. The former imputes to men an important spiritual purpose in which women do not participate. The latter accords men and women equal importance and influence in the kingdom of God...

Additional evidence for this hypothesis of “benevolent domination,” or “soft patriarchy” can be seen in Promise Keepers’ otherwise-laudable concern for supporting local pastors. Each stadium rally features a time when the pastors in attendance are asked to come to the front for prayers, cheers, and encouragement. But nowhere is there any acknowledgement that in today’s churches many pastors are female. And when Promise Keepers president Randy Phillips acknowledges that “a lot of women inside and outside the church have been victims of the misuse of male authority,” the order of his words is telling: not “a male misuse of authority” (which implies that there are other, non-males both properly and improperly exercising authority), but a “misuse of male authority” (suggesting an essential power assigned only for males’—albeit benevolent—use). Equally telling is the logo which decorates each chapter of the Seven Promises book: an image of three men (of various skin shades) holding up the world. In contrast to the ancient Chinese pronouncement that “women hold up half the sky”—and the familiar gospel song affirming that it is God who “has the whole world in his hands,” the book’s logo suggests the overwhelming significance of specifically male effort.

SOCIAL JUSTICE OR INDIVIDUAL NICENESS?

Given the emphasis on racial reconciliation in promise number six, observers have watched carefully to see how much Promise Keepers have been able to translate this into action. It is important, notes Rice University sociologist William Martin, that men of color have tangible evidence that this is a serious, year-round goal—not just 10,000 white guys looking for five black guys to hug” during a weekend rally. Latino journalist Rodolfo Carrasco went to the 1995 Los Angeles rally somewhat skeptical because of Promise Keepers’ avowedly non-political stance. But he ended up genuinely impressed by the number of men of color included in the speakers’ roster and by the regular inclusion of black gospel and Latino songs. “Many of my Latino colleagues would say this just adds up to tokenism. Perhaps so. Then again, the majority white crowd at the largest gathering of Christian men in U.S. history warmly received their Latino brothers. It’s progress.”

Nor was he inclined to scorn speaker E.V. Hill’s emphasis on personal friendship rather than social activism as the path to racial reconciliation. Echoing Donna Minkowitz’ reply to critical feminist colleagues, Carrasco notes that:

[i]f this sounds like a grandiose assessment of individual men’s effect on everyone, it is. The Promise Keepers spend the bulk of their time telling men how to refrain from abusing because they think men ought to be good masters, not abusive ones. They don’t doubt for a moment that the ultimate responsibility for the world—for men’s and women’s lives both—is men’s. This fantasy of benevolent domination is at the core of the Promise Keepers’ vision.

The ambiguity of this call for male repentance was also noted by Ms. magazine’s avowedly secular reporter. Having listened to Randy Phillips affirming God’s concern for “the cries of our wives, the cries of our mothers, the cries of our daughters” Minkowitzz comments that:
Hill got a bunch of white guys, most of whom are clueless about racism in the church, to agree with him—a black man—that racism does exist. He laid the foundation for future racial reconciliation. Think of this: The next time a racially-tinged civil disturbance occurs in our nation, there will be a million white Christian guys who can pick up the phone and call their Latino or African-American brothers and say ‘Hey, what’s going on? What can I do?’ All things considered, I now think Hill’s presentation was a master stroke.49

Others, however, have noted that this concern to understand the pain wrought by racism has no real parallel in an organizational concern about sexism. Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis conclude that for Promise Keepers racism is evil, but sexism doesn’t exist: “While even traditionalist women acknowledge the existence of an unbiblical and hurtful prejudice against women in many evangelical churches, awareness of this problem seems to be missing from the PK agenda.”50 They praise Promise Keepers’ attempts to educate white men to understand the pain felt by men of color due to racism, but add that it “is a shame that they are not also learning to hear, uncritically and nonjudgmentally, the pain that women of all races have experienced in a male-dominant church.”50 And although Ms. magazine’s Donna Minkowitz defends the personal-change focus of Promise Keepers, she agrees that it needs expansion to include a concern for institutional changes in gender relations. At this point in time, she notes, “[f]or the Promise Keepers, the loving care of devoted husbands is the only thing required to improve women’s lives.”51

It may even be that Promise Keepers’ attempt to build cross-racial bridges among men rests on a (perhaps unarticulated) strategy not to undermine—and possibly even to support—some elements of black and Latino male sexism. Although his voice is not typical of black and Latino male sexism. Although his voice is not typical of black and Latino male sexism. Although his voice is not typical of black and Latino male sexism. Although his voice is not typical of black and Latino male sexism. Although his voice is not typical of black and Latino male sexism. Dallas pastor Tony Evans has regularly given a rally talk in which he decries “the feminization of the American male ... ‘sissified’ men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders” and live a life of uncontrolled self-gratification unworthy of true manhood.52 Does this mean that lack of self-control and lack of spiritual purity are everyday characteristics of women? Evans certainly seems to be saying so. At best, such rhetoric is an attempt at noblesse oblige: due to male irresponsibility, women’s “emotional and physical circuits are being overloaded,” and they are “carrying responsibilities that God never intended them to bear.”53 At worst, it is simply misogynist.

More than a few observers of Promise Keepers—secular and Christian alike—have highlighted Tony Evans assertion that men need to “reclaim the role” of male family leadership:

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. If you simply ask for it, your wife is likely to say ‘Look, for the past ten years I’ve had to raise these kids, look after the house and pay the bills ... You think I’m going to turn everything back over to you? Your wife’s concern is justified. Unfortunately, however, 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.”54

Evans advice to “the ladies” then follows: “For the sake of your family and the survival of our culture, let your man be a man if he is willing. Protect yourself, if you must, by handing the reins back slowly. But if your husband tells you he wants to reclaim his role, let him! God never intended for you to bear the load you’re carrying.”55

Defenders of Evans have pointed out that his remarks must be taken in the context of his concern for the chaotic state of many households—and the incidence of male irresponsibility—in black urban environments. But this hardly excuses his attempts to restore male self-control by identifying lack of control with “sissified feminization,” a tactic which resembles the practice of little league coaches tying women’s underwear to the lockers of boys who are not performing up to scratch, in order to shame them publicly by association with womanly weakness. And Evans equation of maleness with household leadership goes beyond Promise Keepers’ normally-muted expressions of soft patriarchy to elevate male authority to the status of a mystical principle on which the very “survival of our culture” depends.56

Almost a century ago, xenophobic American white men were known to support women’s suffrage in order to offset the votes of immigrants and people of color.57 Are we now witnessing a development of the reverse attitude among Promise Keepers—that is, a willingness to sacrifice female empowerment to the goal of cross-racial male solidarity? One hopes not, but the rhetoric of Tony Evans is not encouraging, and though his is an atypical voice among the leaders of Promise Keepers, there is no sign that his sponsors are distancing themselves from his rhetoric or his writing.

CANTHEPERSONREALYREMAINTNONPOLITICAL?

Promise Keepers leaders have repeatedly stated that their movement is nonpolitical: “We are dedicated to uniting men. We are not prescribing what party this is done through, or what ballot measure.”58 Indeed, so anxious is the organization to maintain a “strictly spiritual” image that it postponed a planned 1996 march on Washington for fear of appearing to influence the presidential election. And although no statistics have been compiled on Promise Keepers’ political preferences, observers of the Christian right such as Russell Bellant caution against the assumption that Promise Keepers are uniformly of a right-wing bent. Bellant speaks of “committed trade union supporters and social justice supporters” who attend the stadium rallies,59 and Carl Crawford Schmidt, commenting on Promise Keepers’ doctrinal stance in The Christian Century, concedes that it would “be possible to endorse evolution and still be a Promise Keeper.”60
But other observers remain skeptical of this stated political neutrality for several reasons, some of which have to do with guilt by association. Although founder Bill McCartney has avoided using the Promise Keepers' podium to promote a particular political agenda, during his Colorado coaching career he allowed his name to appear on the fund-raising letters of Colorado for Family Values, sponsor of the famous Amendment Two aimed at blocking civil rights guarantees for homosexuals. When told that this was a violation of university policy, McCartney agreed to remove his name from the letterhead, but used the accompanying news conference as a bully pulpit from which to condemn homosexuality as "an abomination to God," and urge Colorado voters to support the amendment. He has taken similarly-public stands (although not as a Promise Keepers representative) against abortion.

Journalists Jeff Wagenheim and Donna Minkowitz, while genuinely impressed with Promise Keepers' success in redirecting men's priorities, also wonder if the organization is—or will become—"a shrewdly disguised vehicle for furthering the political agenda of the religious right." Promise Keepers have sponsored talks by Jerry Falwell, had their leaders interviewed on Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and had their books published by James Dobson's Focus on the Family organization (which has a lobbying side in its partnership with the conservative Family Research Council). Minkowitz observes that, with resources such as mailing lists, phone banks and voter lists, "an evangelical men's movement with as many as a million members could be a fertile ground for right-wing organizing." Equally troubling is the image of "men who, in their eagerness to reform, have declared a willingness to be commanded"—by God, by their movement leaders—even while taking loving command as servant-leaders in their own homes. "It is possible," she states, "that the depth of emotion and loyalty created in the Promise Keepers would be used to fuel a right-wing movement."

SERVANTHOOD AND SOFT PATRIARCHY

At this point in its organizational development, Promise Keepers is nothing if not contradictory in the messages it sends forth about gender relations. In Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper—an unwieldy volume featuring eighteen contributors and rather loose editing—men are urged in one chapter to "take back the reins of spiritually pure leadership God intended them to hold" and in another to recognize that "equality of leadership" between men and women is "the way God intended the church to operate ... male and female leaders sharing the burden for their families and their community." The same equivocation between soft patriarchy and gender equality can be seen in the writings of single authors, as when Gary Smalley tells men on one page of a New Man article to view their wives as the "most important player" on a team where the husband is still assumed to be head coach, and on another to treat them as "your equal, your adult partner .. equally capable of calling the plays." This being the case, it is difficult to determine whether the organization's male-leadership rhetoric represents "patriarchy of the last gasp"—i.e., vestigial male sexism en route to a vision and practice of gender equality—or (more ominously) a "patriarchy of the first backlash" which will eventuate in a stated hostility to all forms of feminism.

I suggest four possible reasons for this ambiguity of message, the simplest of which is sheer force of habit. Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis point out that Promise Keepers has grown so quickly that its leaders have spent little time thinking through the movement's basic stance on gender relations: "Much is assumed and very little is discussed or debated when it comes to such questions as the validity and meaning of the concept of masculinity; how (or even if) a godly man's behavior is distinguishable from a godly woman's behavior, and how women fit into the "masculine" Christianity being promoted by PK." Despite their trenchant criticisms of the movement as presently conceived, the Groothuis' believe that Promise Keepers is not intentionally teaching pejorative views of women: "Prejudices about the primacy of men usually exist as unexamined, unarticulated, culturally-conditioned assumptions, which are passed onto and received by others in the same way," they note. But ideologies, "when left to run their course ... do tend to proceed from their premises toward their logical conclusions," and for this reason they urge Promise Keepers to take a position on masculine essentialism as that which pertains to biological maleness alone.

But it is possible, secondly, that the organization has allowed—if not deliberately fostered—an ambiguous view of gender relations for pragmatic and/or theological reasons. I have already noted the strongly revivalist impulse within Promise Keepers, and the fact that historically, revivalism's main concern has been to reach as many people as possible with a basic gospel message of repentance and hope. In the service of this end, there is tolerance of differing views on what are seen to be peripheral issues. Moreover, Christians with equally high views of Scripture have differed throughout history as to whether the thrust of Biblical teaching is towards gender equality or male headship in family, church, and society. Indeed, the past decade has seen the growth of two grassroots evangelical organizations—Christians for Biblical Equality and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood—which have taken opposite exegetical stands on this issue. But this means that Promise Keepers' ambiguous messages about male responsibility can function as a kind of projective test. Each listener can hear what he or she wants in them: a message of egalitarian, mutual servanthood or one of reclaimed male headship. And as the Groothuis' point out, this ambiguity "does, after all, benefit the movement in terms of numerical growth. Talk of 'male leadership'—however ill-defined—is bound to attract men who have inextricably associated masculinity with authority."
A third and more benign explanation appeals to a means/end distinction. On this account, Promise Keepers would agree, if pressed, that their seven promises are indeed descriptions of the generic Christian of either sex. But they might go on to assert that due to men's unique needs and weaknesses at this point in history, they need special help in learning to understand and implement those promises. Thus the apparent conflation of manliness with godliness is not a deliberate attempt to marginalize women or see them as religiously less significant, but merely a rhetorical device to capture men's attention and make them realize that they are potentially vital contributors to home and church life—no more, but certainly no less important than women.

Along with the first explanation (that of unreflective force of habit), this is the one I hope is operating, because it suggests that organizational maturation and reflection will be sufficient to clarify what is actually an egalitarian agenda. But as the Groothuis' note, Promise Keepers is typical of mass evangelical movements in that its "overall tenor ... does not appear to be conducive to thoughtful reflection. Promise Keepers typically offers men answers, not questions; catchy slogans, not difficult alternatives to study and evaluate." Other evangelical organizations concerned with gender relations—like Christians for Biblical Equality and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood—have concentrated on producing position papers, books, and quasi-scholarly conferences to buttress their respective positions, and their membership growth (mostly among Evangelicals of an intellectual as well as an activist bent) has been predictably modest as a result. Thus, if Promise Keepers continues to value revivalist growth over the task of clarifying its position on gender justice, it may be a long time before these ambiguities are resolved.

Fourthly and finally, it may be that Promise Keepers' deeper tendency is to become an organization—like those of its 20th century fundamentalist forebears—which proclaims not only a gender essentialism along traditional, stereotyped lines but also a strong gender hierarchy in family, church, and society. Faith Martin, a church historian and founding board member of Christians for Biblical Equality, has noted that most contemporary Evangelicals are careful to avoid the pagan notion that God has a sex, and to affirm that biblical language about God consists of analogical rather than literal descriptions. But not a few of them (beginning with C.S. Lewis and continuing with theologians like J.I. Packer and Donald Bloesch) have followed the Anglo-Catholic tradition of forging an essentialist link between God, masculinity, and Christian manhood. On this account, while God is not literally "male," God is in some mystical, essential sense "masculine." Therefore only those who wear what C.S. Lewis called "the masculine uniform"—i.e., a male body—are fully fit to represent God (and God's son) as leaders in the church, but also in the "little church" represented by the Christian family.

For the most part, Promise Keepers' rhetoric of soft patriarchy appeals to hearty athletic imagery rather than detailed theological debate (as when Seven Promises contributor Howard Hendricks calls for "men who are willing to step up to the plate and assume the leadership role God has given them in their homes"). However, the language of what Faith Martin calls "mystical masculinity" is by no means absent, as when Tony Evans bluntly states that "a father is to be the priest of his home." But in general, as Douglas and Rebecca Groothuis note, Promise Keepers' "apparent assumption of the primary importance of the male role" pertains "not so much to what is explicitly taught as to what often seems implicitly assumed.

For example, I have already noted Promise Keepers' habit of honoring pastors during weekend rallies, and New Man's frequent articles on how to support and affirm them. Nowhere is it said that women cannot be pastors; it is simply assumed that they are not. Journalist Rudy Carrasco sensed this undercurrent of gender role traditionalism during the 1995 Los Angeles rally: "I'm sure some men in the crowd might accept women pastors, but looking around, I couldn't imagine the majority getting excited about following a woman's leadership at church." Another New Man article titled "Is One Paycheck Enough?" gives tips on "enabling your mate to become a full-time mother." Nowhere is it said that a wife cannot be the primary wage earner while her husband is the primary homemaker; it is simply assumed that, if a family budget permits one spouse to stay home, it will be the wife. And here too, the implicit sometimes becomes explicit, as when 1995 Los Angeles Rally speaker Raul Ries suggested the need to get back to the single-income, male-breadwinner family, and Gary Smalley lectured on the supposedly inherent psychological differences between men and women.

But in all fairness, if Promise Keepers are in fact sliding by degrees into a heavy-handed patriarchy, we would expect to hear protests from at least some percentage of their spouses. There is still no systematic study profiling the wives of Promise Keepers, but anecdotal accounts abound of their enthusiasm for the changes their husbands have undergone in terms of decreased workaholism, attention to family responsibilities, and enduring Christian commitment. Indeed, many males at Promise Keepers rallies credit their wives' urging as a major reason for attending. Moreover, fully 30 percent of Promise Keepers' volunteer force doing behind-the-scenes work at rallies are women; at one site they even decided to form their own support group analogous to the men's.

At this point, a cross-cultural comparison may be instructive. Anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco has studied the explosive growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Colombia, and their effect on gender relations among converts. As a feminist trained in Marxist thought, she was conscious of the fact that religious ideology could be "a powerful tool of patriarchy ... reinforcing women's subordination and mystifying it." This possibility seemed all the more likely given the strict gendering of the public/private dichotomy in Latin American society, the high degree to which women identify with their roles as wives and mothers, and the strong cult of machismo which draws men into habitual
public displays of aggression, drinking, and extra-marital womanizing.

At the same time, as an anthropologist Brusco was committed to hearing and respecting the accounts of her female informants regarding the place of Pentecostal evangelicalism in their lives. What she (and other analysts) have found is that women are often the first to convert, and that as husbands and other male kin follow them into the evangelical movement, the material conditions of households improve markedly. No longer does 20 to 40 percent of family income go to the husband’s consumption of alcohol, and the evangelical proscriptions on smoking, gambling and keeping mistresses also lead to a redirection of the husband’s resources and time back into the home.

Moreover, even though (or perhaps because) the evangelical and Pentecostal churches are male-led, they provide male converts with an alternative to the dysfunctional aspects of machismo which is at once face-saving and woman-friendly. Not only are resources directed back towards women and children, but because of the “house church” character of the movement (services usually being held in a front room of the pastor’s residence) leadership is functionally—even if not formally—in the hands of a “pastoral couple,” with strong women’s group activities complementing both men’s groups and gender-integrated worship. Brusco thus concludes that

[In some ways, Colombian evangelicalism can be seen as a ‘strategic’ woman’s movement, like Western feminism, because it serves to reform gender roles in a way that enhances female status ... In reforming male values to be more consistent with female ones (i.e. oriented toward the family rather than toward individualistic consumption) the movement provides a ‘strategic’ challenge to the prevailing form of sexual subordination in Colombia.]

Part of Brusco’s point is that what counts as “feminist” depends greatly on the cultural context in which women are operating. Without oversimplifying parallels between the two societies, it might be said that many North American women also perceive a need to “reform male values to be more consistent with female ones,” living as they do in the midst of high rates 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.

The Promise Keepers movement 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, moderation in alcohol consumption, and attentiveness toward wives and children. This may not be a liberal feminist’s notion of gender utopia, but it cannot—at least not yet—be labelled anti-feminist.

To sum up, Promise Keepers has so far embraced a rhetoric of both servanthood and soft patriarchy, a position ambiguous enough to make Christian feminists of both sexes push them for greater clarity. “Promise Keepers will have to walk a narrow line,” writes seminary professor Howard Snyder, “calling for male leadership without putting down the leadership of women.” And Boulder, Colorado pastor Priscilla Inken, while agreeing that Promise Keepers are “speaking to an important need: for men to take responsibility,” still wonders “What nerve are they touching? Is it men’s hunger to be present in their relationships with their wives and children? Or is it hunger to be on top?” At the same time, a secular journalist like Ms. magazine’s Donna Minkowitz, who regularly does highly critical reporting of the Christian right, ends up concluding that, for all its talk of soft patriarchy, Promise Keepers may be irreversibly shaped by the thirty years of second-wave feminism that preceded it:

[T]he group’s ethic of mutual responsibility and mutual support is perpetually at odds with its conviction that domination is ordained by God. It would be a mistake to conclude that PK’s religious-right leaders are somehow immune to the progressive ideals that they themselves are promoting through this organization. In creating Promise Keepers, they may have themselves been caught in a quasi-feminist whirlwind.

As I leaf through future issues of New Man, I will be inclined to affirm Minkowitz’ optimism if I see two yet-to-be-written articles by the magazine’s male writers. The first would be titled something like “What I Learned the Year I Stayed Home With My Kids.” The second would be titled “My Daughter the Seminarian.” Ironically, New Man has come closest to envisioning such gender role flexibility in one of its paid advertisements for a northern California Christian ranch specializing in “Father, Son and Daughter Adventures.” The photos for this glossy, inside cover spread show fathers with pre-adolescent daughters (no sons anywhere in sight) whitewater rafting and doing challenging rope climbing in a wilderness setting. The promotional copy describes “exciting experiences ... to strengthen your relationship with your child through a variety of shared challenges, goals, and adventures,” all to the end of equipping fathers “with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to effectively prepare their children to be godly men and women, and to build a rock-solid foundation for their future families.”

Now that, if I may say so, is a promising start!


6 Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994) This is a book to which eighteen authors have contributed articles, expounding on the meaning of the seven promises to which men are called to commit themselves in the Promise Keepers movement Go the Distance, edited by John Trent, is a similar volume issued by the same publisher in 1996, with a mostly new set of chapter contributors It also has “workbook” features to help reader progress in their behavioral commitment to the seven promises.

7 New Man, Strang Communications Co., 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746 This magazine began publication in 1994, and has adopted a style and format not unlike that of Christianity Today.

8 These include a doctoral dissertation in progress on the rhetoric of Evangelical feminism by Laurie Coene Dashau, English Department and Women’s Studies Program, Miami University of Ohio, and Todd Yonkman’s “Promise Keepers: Repentance, Forgiveness and Male Affirmation.” Unpublished paper from the Brauer Seminar on the History of Religion and the Family, University of Chicago Divinity School, June 1995.


16 Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender; De Berg, Ungodly Women; Epstein, The Politics of Domesticity; Griswold, Fatherhood in America; Rotundo, American Fatherhood.


18 Ibid., p 17


20 That Promise Keepers is in many ways riding on the coat tails of an earlier, secular men’s movement — which in turn represents a variety of responses to the feminist movement — is suggested by the fact that Promise Keepers literature often refers to the organization as part of the “Christian men’s movement”.

21 See Robert Bly, Iron John: A Book About Men (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990), Seven Promises of A Promise Keeper, especially ch 4, and Gilbreath, “Manhood’s Great Awakening.” For a historical analysis, particularly of men’sfraternal orders as a male-oriented alternative By 1897, one out of every ten adult males belonged to a fraternal order. The Promise Keepers movement is in many respects an updated version of this earlier, secular men’s movement — which in turn represents a variety of responses to the feminist movement — is suggested by the fact that Promise Keepers literature often refers to the organization as part of the “Christian men’s movement”.

22 See for example, Hagen, Women Respond to the Men’s Movement and Kimmel, The Politics of Manhood The latter volume also has several chapters in which leaders in the mythopoetic men’s movement respond to these criticisms.


26 Minkowitz, “In the Name of the Father,” pp 67, 68.

27 Ibid., p 71.


29 Harry Triandis, Culture and Social Behavior (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994).


32 Jerry Kirk, “A Man and His Integrity,” in Seven Promises of A Promise Keeper, pp 83-98 (quotation from p 92).

Middle class women were not entirely innocent of racism themselves. (57)

Ibid., pp.

Ibid., p 74.

Tony Evans, "Spiritual Purity," in Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, pp 73-81 (quotation from p 73).

Ibid., p 74.

Ibid., pp 79-80 (Evans' italics).

Ibid., p 80.


Middle class women were not entirely innocent of racism themselves in this endeavor, since in return for men's support of women's suffrage, they agreed to support the poll tax and literacy tests as ways of reducing the voting strength of immigrants and people of color. See Aileen S Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971).

58 Promise Keepers' press secretary Steve Chavis, as quoted in Minkowitz, "In the Name of the Father," p 70.

59 Ibid., p 70.


61 Wagenheim, Among the Promise Keepers," p 75.

62 Ibid.

63 Minkowitz, "In the Name of the Father," p 71.

64 Ibid., p 71.

65 Evans, "Spiritual Purity," p 75.


67 Gary Smalley, "Treat Her Like a Queen," New Man, Vol 3, No 1 (Jan./ Feb 1996), pp 30-33 (quotations from pp 30 and 33).


69 Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis, "Women Keep Promises Too!" p 20.

70 Ibid., p 20.


72 Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis, "Women Keep Promises Too!" p 21.

73 Ibid., p 22.


76 Evans, "Spiritual Purity," p 76.

77 Rebecca and Douglas Groothuis, "Women Keep Promises Too!" p 19.

78 Carrasco, "One Small Step for Humankind: The Promise Keepers do L.A."


82 Van Biema, "Full of Promise," p 63.


84 Ibid., p 2.

85 Ibid., p 6.

86 Snyder, "Will Promise Keepers Keep Their Promises?" p 21.

87 Quoted in Wagenheim, "Among the Promise Keepers," p 77.

88 Minkowitz, "In the Name of the Father," p 71.