

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN THE PROMISE KEEPERS' MOVEMENT**

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN THE  
PROMISE KEEPERS' MOVEMENT:  
AMBIGUITY AND THE PROCESS OF EXPANDING MARKET SHARE**

**By**

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**A thesis**

**Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies**

**in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**McMaster University**

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**MASTER OF ARTS (1999)**  
**McMaster University**  
**(Sociology)**  
**Hamilton, Ontario**

**TITLE: The Construction of Gender in the Promise Keepers' Movement:  
Ambiguity and the Process of Expanding Market Share**

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**NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 118**

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the discussion of gender in the Promise Keepers' movement. The research presented in the following pages is based upon 20 informal interviews with Promise-Keeping men from southwestern Ontario and participant observation at 2 stadium events. The evangelical men's movement maintains an ambiguous discussion of gender, simultaneously promoting both egalitarian and patriarchal concepts. Promise-Keeping men tend to discuss gender roles using one of three concepts: mutual submission, servant leadership, and re-claiming male authority. In discussing gender issues, many Promise Keepers display sensitivity to the feminist agenda. As a result, the research presented in this thesis undermines those who describe Promise Keepers as entirely patriarchal or anti-feminist. A market analogy is used to account for the ambiguity of the movement's discussion of gender. By maintaining an ambiguous discourse on gender, Promise Keepers attracts men who hold differing, if not contradictory, notions of the roles of men and women.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful for the encouraging comments and helpful reviews provided by my academic advisor, Rhoda Howard, and the members of my supervisory committee, Ellen Badone and William Shaffir. I would also like to express a deep sense of gratitude to my parents whose emotional and financial support have been key to the success of my academic endeavours.

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## INTRODUCTION

Promise Keepers is a Christian, evangelical, inter-denominational men's movement which, according to its mission statement, is "dedicated to uniting men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world" (Promises Worth Keeping 1998). The Promise Keepers' organization has experienced phenomenal growth, expanding from a gathering of 4,200 men in 1991 to a movement which attracted hundreds of thousands of men to the National Mall, Washington D.C. in 1997. As a result of its meteoric development and adherence to a conservative religious framework, the men's movement has come under the watchful eye of organizations such as the (U.S.) National Organization for Women, and prominent journalistic publications, such as Newsweek (Cose 1997) and The Economist ("New men for Jesus," 1995). A few days after the Promise Keepers 1997 rally at the National Mall, the cover of Time magazine featured a picture of promise-keeping men in various postures of worship. Alongside this picture read the following caption:

### THE PROMISE KEEPERS:

A new U.S. movement is filling stadiums with men asserting their manhood.

This week they rally in Washington. Should they be cheered - or feared?

The feelings of unease concerning Promise Keepers are often centred around the men's movement's gender ideology. The October 6th article in Time says: "The group's mission is vague and unsettling regarding its relationships with women" (Stodghill 1997:25).

Using a methodological platform of informal interviewing and participant observation, this thesis endeavours to analyze Promise Keepers' gender ideology, placing the men's movement in the context of evangelicalism, the religious ideology of which it is a part. In particular, this thesis will argue that Promise Keepers' gender ideology is ambiguous, simultaneously promoting egalitarian and patriarchal conceptions of the roles of men and women. The ambiguity of its gender ideology enables Promise Keepers to attract men who adhere to differing, if not oppositional, notions of the roles of men and women.

The first chapter discusses previously written works on Promise Keepers and the methodological platform upon which the research presented in this thesis is based. The second chapter examines a Promise Keepers' event as a pilgrimage. The relationship between evangelicalism, Promise Keepers, and modernity is the focus of the third chapter. The fourth chapter explores gender issues among Promise-Keeping men, while the fifth chapter uses an economic analogy to examine the movement. The remainder of this introduction will explore the origins of Promise Keepers and the religious order which is presented by the movement.

### **The Origins of Promise Keepers**

Promise Keepers originated in the United States in March 1990 when University of Colorado head football coach Bill McCartney and a friend, Dave Wardell, envisioned a football stadium filled with Christian men. In July of 1991, 4,200 men gathered for the first Promise Keepers conference, held at the University of



Colorado's basketball arena. In 1992, 22,000 men gathered at the University of Colorado's Folsom Field and, in 1993, 50,000 men filled Folsom to capacity. In 1996, 1.1 million men attended Promise Keepers conferences held in twenty-two stadiums across the United States (PK Official Website).

On October 4th 1997, hundreds of thousands of promise-keeping men gathered on the National Mall in Washington D.C.. The main purpose of the event, according to Bill McCartney, was "to gather a diverse multitude of men to confess personal and collective sin" (PK Official Website). The event was called "Stand in the Gap," based upon a biblical passage,<sup>1</sup> and represented a call for men to repent for the moral failings of the United States. In many respects, the event resembled a stadium conference with speakers and men forming small groups to confess their sins and to pray for one another. Attendance estimates for the event ranged from 480,000 to 1.3 million (Peterson and Gilbreath 1997:33).

The U.S. Promise Keepers organization has permanent headquarters in Denver, Colorado and, in 1996, the organization employed a full-time staff of 452 and operated with a budget of \$117 million. For 1998, instead of charging a \$60 registration fee to attend a conference, Promise Keepers decided to offer all of its conferences free of charge and switched to donor-based financing. On March 31st 1998, many suspected that the organization would fold when it laid off its entire staff. Three weeks later, the organization had received \$4 million in donations, enabling it to recall its entire staff.

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<sup>1</sup>"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none" (Ezekiel 22:30).

With the organization's new donor-based financial structure, the 1998 budget was \$48 million, a drastic reduction in comparison to the organization's \$112 million budget of 1997 (PK Official Website).

For the future, the U.S. chapter of Promise Keepers has not planned to conduct any stadium events past 1999. The organization is, however, planning a major event for January 1st 2000. On this day, Promise Keepers is planning to conduct assemblies in every U.S. state capitol to "proclaim three things: a vibrant men's ministry in every church, linked by a vital prayer network, practicing intentional reconciliation" (PK 1998 Men's Conf. 1998:9).<sup>2</sup> Invitations to these assemblies are extended not only to men, but also to women and children.

In Canada, the Promise Keepers organization is officially independent of its American counterpart, though Promise Keepers Canada imports some of the American movement's conference speakers, employs the same hymns, features the same conference themes, and promotes the same Promise Keepers resources and paraphernalia. The Canadian Promise Keepers' ties to the American movement were evident at the *Promise Keepers conference* held in Kitchener, Ontario in September 1998, where both nation's flags were hung above the stage.

Promise Keepers Canada was launched in September 1995. In 1996, three events were held in Hamilton, Ontario; Vancouver, B.C.; and Red Deer, Alberta,

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<sup>2</sup>Promise Keepers does not specify that its goal to proclaim "a vibrant men's ministry" in every church is restricted to evangelical congregations. Given the organization's willingness to allow Catholics and liberal Protestants to attend its stadium events, it is likely that Promise Keepers desires to see "a vibrant men's ministry" in all Protestant and Catholic churches.

attracting a total of 30,000 men. In 1997, six arena conferences were held and these conferences were attended by 25,000 men. In 1998, four arena conferences were held. Promise Keepers Canada has a national office located in the Crossroads Christian Communications building in Burlington, Ontario. The Canadian organization claims that its constituency stretches from the East to West coast and into the Territories (PK 1998 Kitch. Conf.).

As for its future plans, Promise Keepers Canada is calling "upon Christians [both male and female] in every city and town across Canada to set aside the first Friday of every month as a day of prayer with fasting for the nation" (PK 1998 Kitch. Conf. 1998:6). The organization seeks "to ensure that the entire nation is covered by networks of prayer by the year 2000" (PK 1998 Kitch. Conf. 1998:6). Promise Keepers Canada also has a goal to see "2002 Canadian churches with a vibrant men's ministry by the year 2002" (PK 1998 Kitch. Conf. 1998:6). Thus far, there is little indication of the method by which the organization will accomplish these goals of establishing prayer networks and "vibrant men's ministries."

### **Promise Keepers and New Paradigm Churches**

Many elements of the Promise Keepers' organizational philosophy and style of worship are a reflection of broader trends which are occurring within American Protestantism. In Reinventing American Protestantism, Donald E. Miller examines an emerging form of Protestantism in the United States which he refers to as "new paradigm churches" (Miller 1997). Miller examines three movements, all of which originated in southern California, which exemplify the characteristics of new paradigm

churches: *Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel*. These churches have experienced phenomenal growth, with over a thousand congregations between the three movements, and are attracting individuals who would not normally attend church.

While the members of new paradigm churches adhere to a conservative theological framework, with the majority believing that the Bible is a text without error, Miller refrains from labelling these churches as fundamentalist, evangelical, or charismatic. These categories of Christian phenomena, according to Miller, are inadequate as they do not capture the culturally-current quality of new paradigm churches. Cultural currency is evident in the worship of new paradigm churches, where a rock band leads the congregation in singing contemporary-sounding songs which have a biblical message. Moreover, new paradigm churches are culturally relevant in that they deal with current issues. For instance, Miller reports that one church has a small group which helps individuals with personal debt management.

Miller argues that people are attracted to these culturally-relevant churches because they offer their members a caring, safe community within which the individual can raise children, deal with personal problems, and gain a sense of hope for the future. Unlike the denominational structure of mainline churches, new paradigm churches have a decentralized authority which provides lay members with a sense of empowerment through increased leadership opportunities (Miller 1997). In summary, new paradigm churches are characterized by the following qualities:

1. they were started after mid 1960s
2. the majority of congregation members were born after 1945

3. seminary training of clergy is optional
  4. worship is contemporary
  5. lay leadership is highly valued
  6. they have extensive small group ministries
  7. clergy and congregants usually dress informally
  8. tolerance of different personal styles is prized
  9. pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing
  10. bodily, rather than mere cognitive, participation in worship is the norm
  11. the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" are affirmed
  12. Bible-centered teaching predominates over topical sermonizing
- (Miller 1997:20).

While Promise Keepers is not a church, the men's movement possesses many of the same qualities which distinguish a new paradigm church. Psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen estimates that the average age of the men who attend a Promise Keepers stadium event is 38 (Van Leeuwen 1997). Many of the men who present seminars at the stadium event are not trained clergy. These men are usually accomplished athletes or successful business men. While traditional hymns are often sung at Promise Keepers' conferences, the majority of the singing is contemporary-sounding. Singing is facilitated by a full band: a lead guitarist and vocalist, a bass player, a drummer, a back-up guitarist, a keyboard player, and back-up vocalists. Lay leaders assist with many aspects of the Promise Keepers' stadium events. Booths which sell Promise Keepers' resources, the team of people who counsel new converts, and the team of ushers who coordinate a variety of tasks, from picking up garbage to providing individuals with direction to the washroom, are usually staffed by lay leaders.

At the conferences, men are often directed to form a small group comprised of four or five of the men seated around them. Once these small groups are formed, the

individuals leading the conference direct each man to share personal experiences or struggles with the other men in his group. These groups often provide a forum within which the men can pray for one another. Those leading the conference also often encourage the men to return home and create or join small groups; these groups provide an environment in which the men can study the Bible and help each other to remain committed to the seven promises. (Small groups as well as the seven promises will be discussed in detail in the following section.)

Both those who lead and those who attend the conference events dress informally, often wearing golf shirts embroidered with the Promise Keepers' logo. The way in which men participate in worship at Promise Keepers' events is similar to Miller's description of worship in new paradigm churches. Many of the men worship in a "bodily" as opposed to a "mere cognitive" manner. That is, many men at Promise Keepers' events use their body to express themselves in worship. Some men raise their hands with palms open to the sky as if they are receiving a gift from or giving something to God. At times, some men kneel with eyes tightly closed and hands pressed together, a posture which connotes humility. At the Canadian conference I attended, a few men danced in the aisles during worship, waving flags in the air. It appears as though the men who lead and attend the stadium events tolerate a variety of different worship styles, as the conferences seem to provide an atmosphere where men feel comfortable expressing themselves in worship through a variety of different postures.

While I have not had the opportunity to assess the extent to which the leaders of Promise Keepers are "understated" and "humble," those who organize the men's movement have a tendency to reveal their own personal failures. For instance, in an interview published in the evangelical magazine Christianity Today, Bill McCartney describes his personal failures (Alsdurf 1998). In my field experiences attending two Promise Keepers stadium events, I did not see anyone embracing "the gifts of the Holy Spirit;" personal characteristics which include the ability to prophesy, perform miracles, speak in tongues, and interpret those who speak in tongues (Miller 1997:92). Promise Keepers, however, has many ties to the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a Protestant movement which includes the gifts of the spirit as part of worship (Miller 1997). Not only is McCartney a member of a Vineyard church, but James Ryle, the senior pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Longmont, Colorado, spoke at the Detroit Conference 1998.

In contrast to new paradigm churches, the seminars at stadium events tend to take the form of "topical sermonizing." While the men conducting the seminars make many references to biblical texts, each seminar centres around a particular topic, such as "Living a Legacy of Unity in the Church" (seminar conducted at the Detroit conference 1998).

### **A Profile of Promise Keepers' Ideology**

Promise Keepers' ideology centres around the seven promises of a promise keeper, whereby men pledge to display a higher degree of commitment to their God,

wives, families, and "fellow-man." In providing a profile of Promise Keepers' ideology, this section will examine the seven promises of a promise keeper in light of Peter Berger's and Clifford Geertz's conceptualizations of the order-producing quality of religion.

According to sociologist Peter Berger, society is a dialectic phenomenon which is comprised of three stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The process of externalization is "an anthropological necessity" (Berger 1967:4). Whereas non-human animals are born with an instinctual structure which determines their activity, humans are biologically deprived of "highly specialized and firmly directed drives" and, therefore, enter an "open" world which they must construct (Berger 1967:5,6). Through externalization, humans pour their physical and mental activity into creating a human world. The process of objectivation takes place when this world created by humans "confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves" (Berger 1967:4). The reappropriation of this objectivated human world into "the structures of the subjective consciousness" occurs through internalization (Berger 1967:4).

The world-building enterprise is, according to Berger, an "ordering, or nomizing, activity" (Berger 1967:19). Lacking the instinctual structure of non-human animals, humans "are compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality" (Berger 1967:22). It is through conversation with others that individuals construct, sustain, and appropriate an order. The order remains real to the individual only insofar as the individual continues the conversation with "significant others" (Berger 1967:17).



When this conversation is interrupted, the individual is confronted with an anomic situation. The socially constructed nomos functions as the individual's "shield against terror" (Berger 1967:22).

Through the concept of "cosmization," Berger argues that the humanly meaningful world is infused with reality, "the former now being grounded in the latter, reflecting it or being derived from it in its fundamental structures" (Berger 1967:27). This "ultimate ground and validation of human nomoi" is evident, not only in religious ideology and practice, but also in scientific perspectives (Berger 1967:27). Religion differs from scientific perspectives, however, in that it involves the establishment of a sacred cosmos, transcending and including humans, which "provides man's ultimate shield against the terror of anomy" (Berger 1967:27). Religion, according to Berger, "is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant" (Berger 1967:28).

In "Religion As a Cultural System," anthropologist Clifford Geertz presents the following definition of a religion:

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973:90).

There are many similarities between Berger and Geertz's conceptualizations of religion. Geertz's essay, originally published in 1966, is of the same era and precedes slightly Berger's The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, published in 1967. Like Berger's emphasis on humans' need to externalize themselves,

Geertz argues that people rely on "extrinsic sources of information" and a system of symbols provides such a source (Geertz 1973:92). Both Berger and Geertz propose that religion is an order-producing activity. Geertz states that "if sacred symbols did not at one and the same time induce dispositions in human beings and formulate, however obliquely, inarticulately, or unsystematically, general ideas of order, then the empirical differentia of religious activity or religious experience would not exist" (Geertz 1973:98). In providing humans with "a general order of existence," religion protects individuals from the threat of chaos and disorder which materializes at the limits of a human's "analytical capacities", "powers of endurance", and "moral insight" (Geertz 1973:100). Religion protects the individual by providing, through symbols, "an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes of human experience" (Geertz 1973:108).

Whereas Berger argues that it is through "conversation" that humans create, maintain, and appropriate the socially constructed *nomos* (religious phenomena or otherwise), Geertz asserts that it is in ritual (or "consecrated behaviour") that "the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world" (Geertz 1973:112). This fusion provides the individual with the conviction that the religious perspective is "really real" (Geertz 1973). While a conversation requires the presence of at least two individuals, a ritual may be performed in isolation. For Berger, the plausibility of a religious framework is dependent upon human interaction. In contrast, Geertz

proposes that the reality of a religious perspective depends upon the performance of ritual acts.

Promise Keepers' ideology contains a particular order and this order serves to protect men from what Promise Keepers views as the chaotic character of contemporary society. Using data collected from respondents and the book Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper,<sup>3</sup> the following discussion will provide an account of the order that is put forth in the seven promises, examining each promise in turn.

#### **Promise 1 - "A Man and His God"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to honouring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit (Janssen and Weeden 1994:13).

In making the first promise, a man is committing himself to be devoted to Jesus Christ. Concerning the first promise, Tom, a 32 year old who works full-time in the Canadian Promise Keepers' office, said the following:

We believe very strongly that Jesus Christ is the answer to any problem any person has in life. Through entering into a relationship with Him, they can have peace in their life, not that they won't have problems, but they can have peace in their life and they can be helped through the problems by God.

The respondent's conviction that a man can be "helped through problems by God" exemplifies Geertz's assertion that religion accounts for "the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes of human experience" (Geertz 1973:108). According to the Promise Keepers' worldview, when men do not commit themselves to the first

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<sup>3</sup>Unless identified as a "respondent," the quotes used in this section are taken from the book entitled Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper (Janssen and Weeden 1994). Each author contributing to this book has written about one specific promise and, accordingly, I have used excerpts from his writing to refer to the promise about which he has written.

promise, their lives result in disorder. In the following excerpt from Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, pastor Jack Hayford compares non-Christian familial structures to homes devastated by an earthquake in Mexico:

And a life built with nothing at its centre results in homes and relationships with nothing underneath them... like the pancaked houses in Mexico, groundless "faith" and lack of commitment to worship result in homes without foundations and relationships without roots. When stress comes, they can't stand the test (Hayford 1994:18).

Like the respondent quoted above, Hayford believes that Christianity provides a man with stability in the face of life's problems. In the following paragraph from Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, pastor Wellington Boone provides a more detailed account of the chaos which is supposed to result from a society which has neglected the first promise:

Today, we are faced with a culture in steady decline. The number of violent crimes in the United States, for example, has increased 570 percent since 1960, while the population increased only 43 percent. Over the same period, illegitimate births increased more than 400 percent. The U.S. has the highest rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth in the industrialized world. From 1960 to 1993, SAT scores dropped 67 points. I could go on and on, but you get the picture. There's no doubt that the situation is grim (Boone 1994:25).

Following Boone, the solution to "a culture in steady decline" is revival, "the movement of the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary way that causes multitudes to be drawn to Christ" (Boone 1994:26).

## **Promise 2 - "A Man and His Mentors"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises (Janssen and Weeden 1994:43).

In making promise 2, a man commits himself to developing friendships with other men, men who will assist him in remaining a committed promise keeper. To understand a religious perspective as plausible, according to Berger, or "really real," following Geertz, an individual needs to engage in conversations with significant others (Berger 1967) or rituals (Geertz 1973). Promise Keepers encourages the men to participate in conversations with significant others and rituals by directing men to engage in the process of "mentoring." In the following excerpt, Dr. Howard G. Hendricks, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, describes the process of mentoring, urging men to have three different types of close friendships:

Mentoring is a process involving people. Sometimes it's a whole series of individuals that God brings in your life at various stages and for various purposes. In every case, those people are committed to helping you grow and perpetuate the learning process... Every man reading this book should seek to have three individuals in his life... You need a Paul. That is, you need an older man who is willing to build into your life... You also need a Barnabas. That is, you need a soul brother, somebody who loves you but is not impressed by you. Somebody who is not taken in by your charm and popularity and to whom you can be accountable... Third, you need a Timothy. You need a younger man into whose life you are building (Hendricks 1994:51,53,54).

Mentoring, according to Hendricks, is a process that is needed to help restore the disorder of contemporary society.

First, you need to be involved in mentoring because of the severe shortage of leaders. Leaders are fast becoming an endangered species. Wherever I go, across America or around the world, the screaming need is for leaders... We need leaders in our homes, too. The American family is unravelling like a cheap sweater. May I remind you of one historical fact: No nation has ever survived the disintegration of its home life. Once the home goes, its just a question of time before it all goes... Second, we need mentoring because of the perceived need for mentors. There's a severe deficiency in our culture, and it's seen in a number of areas. The first is the absence of fathers. I'm not talking only about physically absent; I'm talking about fathers who are emotionally and spiritually absent (Hendricks 1994:49).

Promise Keepers also encourages men to engage in conversation with significant others through the concept of "accountability," whereby a man "willingly grants other men the right to inquire about his relationship with God, his commitment to his family, his sexuality, his financial dealings, and his relationships to others (believers and non-believers)" (PK "A Man's Man" 1993:7). Accountability normally takes place within a group of 5-10 men who meet together on a regular basis (PK Pam. 1993:7). Furthermore, the structure of the book Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper promotes conversation with significant others, as each chapter contains questions for men to ask each other within the context of a group study.

### **Promise 3 - "A Man and His Integrity"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity (Janssen and Weeden 1994:69).

The third promise represents a commitment to integrity. In Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, editors Janssen and Weeden describe integrity as follows:

What does integrity look like? That question can be answered by seeing how our faith affects the way we conduct our business and the moral choices we make. It's integrity that prevents a Promise Keeper from entering into a shady business deal. It's integrity that says he will choose to express his sexuality only within the confines of his marriage. It's integrity that make him do the right thing instead of just the easy thing (Janssen and Weeden 1994:71).

More specifically, in promise 3 men are required to exercise spiritual leadership in the home. Author, pastor, and frequent conference speaker Dr. Tony Evans describes the importance of male spiritual leadership in the following passage:

Without strong families built on a framework of biblical morality, there is no sum of money - no federal, state, county, or municipal program - that can get us out of the ditch we've fallen into. How do we break the cycle? By getting men to assume their responsibilities and take back the reins of spiritually pure

leadership God intended us to hold. Otherwise, our culture is lost (Evans 1994:75).

Evans describes the "ditch" or disorder into which society has fallen in the following excerpt:

It is painfully apparent that America is losing its families... Since a culture's only hope of survival is its families, our very existence is threatened as home after home falls victim to divorce, abandonment, abuse, or neglect... I am convinced that the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization of the American male. When I say feminization, I am not talking about sexual preference. I'm trying to describe a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of "sissified" men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum (Evans 1994:73).

According to Evans, the decline of the traditional familial institution and "the feminization of the American male" are evidence of the disorder of society. Promise 3 also requires men to adopt a "biblical" standard of morality. Clinical psychologist Dr. Gary Oliver describes this standard in the following passage:

If there is any hope for our marriages, our families, our cities, our nation, and our civilization, we men must passionately embrace the biblical standard for who God would have us to be and to become (Oliver 1994:90).

While urging men to embrace a biblical standard, Promise Keepers also criticizes what it views as the absence of standards in the wider culture. Oliver portrays this absence of standards as follows:

We are a generation that isn't sure where the line is between right and wrong. Many don't believe there is a line, or, if there is, they don't care... Thirty-five years ago, our country followed the Judeo-Christian ethic. Few people questioned that chastity was a good thing, that hard work was the duty of every responsible man, that homosexual conduct was wrong, and that it was never right to lie, cheat, steal, or commit adultery. But today, our ethics and morals are no longer based on Jerusalem; they're based on Sodom and Gomorrah (Oliver 1994:84).

In particular, Promise-Keeping men make a commitment to adopt a specific code of sexual conduct. Jerry Kirk, president of the National Coalition Against Pornography writes about this code of sexual conduct:

For the single man, this means a willingness to wait until marriage for sexual intercourse. For us married men, sexual purity means reflecting God's absolute faithfulness to us in our faithfulness to our wives (Kirk 1994:94).

This code of sexual conduct is contrasted with the absence of sexual standards in contemporary society:

Our culture's rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and devastated relationships each bear witness to the prevailing sexual ethic and the consequences of abandoning God's call to sexual purity (Kirk 1994:92).

#### **Promise 4 - "A Man and His Family"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values (Janssen and Weeden 1994:101).

Whereas promise 3 represents a more general commitment to integrity, promise 4 requires men to commit to being better husbands and fathers. Tom describes promise 4 in the following excerpt:

What we say to every guy is whoever your family is, if you are a single guy or if you are a married guy, whoever your family is... honour your family... respect your family... take time to be with your family.

According to Dr. James C. Dobson, a Christian psychologist, many men have neglected their responsibilities as fathers.

During the formative years of life, when children are so vulnerable to their experiences, they're receiving 37 seconds a day from their fathers and 30 or more hours a week from commercial television! Need we ask where our kids are getting their values? ... My point is that the breathless American life-style is particularly costly to children. Yet 1.8 million youngsters come home to an empty house after school each day. They are called "latchkey" kids because



they wear the keys to their front doors around their necks. Not only are their fathers overcommitted and preoccupied, but now, their mothers are energetically seeking fulfilment in the working world, too. So who is at home with the kids? More commonly, the answer is nobody (Dobson 1994:118).

When men are not committed fathers, it is, following Dobson, the children's lives which fall into disorder, as the children grow up with values espoused by commercial television and without after-school parental interaction. Dobson blames the occurrence of uncommitted fathers on the "me first" philosophy which he believes originated during the 1970s and the early 1980s (Dobson 1994:122).

#### **Promise 5 - "A Man and His Church"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honouring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources (Janssen and Weeden 1994:129).

With the fifth promise, Promise Keepers is encouraging men to bring "triple honour" to their pastors and to become active in the leadership and organization of their churches. By bringing "honour," men are supposed to display support and respect to ecclesiastical authorities. Dale Schlafer, a pastor himself, argues that since men have not been honouring their pastors, the church has become disorderly.

...the hurt, the neglect, the dishonouring have gone on for so long, and with such intensity, that large numbers of pastors are turning in their resignations because they feel so alone and unsupported. One recent poll revealed that 80 percent of pastors responding had thought about quitting in the last three months (Schlafer 1994:136).

In the following quote, Schlafer argues that current societal trends discourage a man's attempt to bring honour to his pastor:

...why are pastors not honoured in our day? First, our culture encourages us to not show honour to anyone. We live in a day of egalitarianism that doesn't allow for differences and appears to treat all people the same. Political and

sports cartoonists ridicule those in authority. Comedians poke fun at anyone in a place of prominence. And the average Christian carries that same attitude into the Church (Schlafer 1994:134).

### **Promise 6 - "A Man and His Brothers"**

A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity (Janssen and Weeden 1994:153).

In making promise 6, a Promise Keeper is committing himself to pray and develop friendships with men from other racial and denominational backgrounds. This commitment is based upon biblical passages which emphasize the need for the church to be unified (John 17:20-23 and I Corinthians 12:13). Promise Keepers adopted this promise as a result of an experience which Bill McCartney had in 1991. McCartney recounts this experience in the following passage:

"Only" about 4,000 of us were gathered that year, but we already had dreams of filling Folsom Field with 50,000 men in the near future. As I got up to address the men at the end of that conference, I looked out over the crowd, and I noticed that it was overwhelmingly white. The absence of men of colour somehow hit me between the eyes, and in that moment, the Spirit of God clearly said to my spirit, "You can fill that stadium, but if men of other races aren't there, I won't be there, either" (McCartney 1994:160).

The divisions between different races and denominations have been, according to McCartney, counterproductive to the mission of the church.

You see, I believe racism and denominational divisions have done more than just about anything to hamper the church's witness to the world. So many people of colour, like the friend I mentioned earlier, have been totally turned off to the God we proclaim by our obvious lack of love. Even nonbelieving white people know that Christians are supposed to love and that far too often we fail to do so (McCartney 1994:161).

According to McCartney, to restore the church's "witness" men need to "pursue genuine relationships with Christian men of different races and denominations"

(McCartney 1994:165). In pursuing "Christian men," Promise Keepers concerns itself with racial divisions within the church and not with the problems between individuals of different races which occur in the wider society.

The book Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper was written in the context of the U.S.. Many Canadian promise keepers recognize that some issues of racial reconciliation that are relevant to American men are not as evident in Canada's inter-racial dynamics. Tom substituted Canadian issues for American racial disharmony in the following passage:

In Canada, it is very different than it is in the U.S.. In the U.S., it is more black, white, and hispanic. In Canada, what we are saying to men is that, there are some major racial issues in this country that we have swept underneath the rug, but if you were to listen to each other's conversations, we would have to admit that they exist because we may hear a little joke which puts down aboriginal people in this country. How many times in English Canada have we spoken a word of hatred toward a French Canadian? Just because they are a French Canadian automatically means that they want to separate from the rest of Canada and that they hate this country. Those are the two major issues in Canada.

According to Tom, by committing themselves to promise 6, Canadian Promise Keepers are expected to develop friendships across the racial and ethnic barriers that exist between aboriginal and non-aboriginal individuals and between English and French Canadians.

### **Promise 7 - "A Man and His World"**

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

By making this last promise, men commit themselves to love God, love their neighbours (the Great Commandment), and to evangelize others (the Great

Commission). Promise Keepers' focus on evangelism is evident in the organization's practice of conducting an "altar call," whereby non-Christian men are encouraged to take the necessary steps to become Christians, at the beginning of each stadium event. Furthermore, at the beginning of the book entitled Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, the reader is confronted with the heading "Are You Sure You're a Christian?" If the answer is "no" the reader is encouraged to become a Christian by fulfilling the following requirements:

1. Admit your spiritual need. "I am a sinner."
2. Repent. Be willing to turn from your sin and, with God's help, start living to please Him.
3. Believe that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross and rose again.
4. Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and life. Pray something like this from the sincerity of your heart:

Dear Lord Jesus,

I know I am a sinner. I believe You died for my sins and then rose from the grave. Right now, I turn from my sins and open the door of my heart and life. I receive You as my personal Lord and Saviour. Thank You for saving me. Amen.

5. Then tell a believing friend and a pastor about your commitment (Phillips 1994:10).

### **Promise Keepers' Ideology in the Context of Bill McCartney's Life Experiences**

As others have noted (Van Leeuwen 1997 and Lippy 1997), Promise Keepers' ideology should be examined within the context of Bill McCartney's life experiences. Bill McCartney is the founder of Promise Keepers and the former head coach of the University of Colorado football team. Promise Keepers' concern for racial reconciliation, as evidenced in promise 6, is not surprising, considering the fact that McCartney was "the only head coach of a National Collegiate Athletic Association

Division 1-A football team to have as many men of colour on his coaching staff as he had whites" (Abraham 1997:124) and considering that McCartney's daughter has given birth to two children, each fathered by a different "man of colour" (Abraham 1997: 29). McCartney admits that, during his coaching career, he frequently neglected his wife and children. Even several years after he began his involvement with Promise Keepers, McCartney's marriage was failing, as he juggled his responsibilities with the men's movement and as head football coach (Alsdurf 1998). Promise Keepers' insistence that men need to be responsible husbands and fathers, evidenced in promises 3 and 4, is probably, at least in part, a result of McCartney's own feelings of failure as a husband and father. Promises 1, 5, and 7 are indicative of the organization's evangelical ideology and are consistent with the views expressed by the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, the church to which McCartney is affiliated (Van Leeuwen 1997).

By committing themselves to the Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, men devote themselves to a particular order. This order centres around devotion to Jesus Christ; the development of friendships with other evangelical men; the display of integrity, spiritual leadership, and a biblical standard of morality; a commitment to marriage and the familial institution; the portrayal of honour to ecclesiastical authorities; the development of friendships with men from other racial and denominational backgrounds; and a commitment to love God and evangelize others. Alongside the presentation of this order, the authors of Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper portray secular society as disorderly, characterized by racial barriers, high rates

of crime, and an absence of leaders, traditional families, and clear standards of morality. In contrasting the order presented in the Seven Promises with the supposedly chaotic nature of secular society, *Promise Keepers* exemplifies Berger's depiction of religion as the "ultimate shield against the terror of anomy" (Berger 1967:27).

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **LITERATURE ON PROMISE KEEPERS AND A METHODOLOGICAL PLATFORM**

After a review of the academic literature which examines the Promise Keepers' movement, this chapter describes the methodological platform upon which the research presented in subsequent chapters is based.

#### **Review of Literature on Promise Keepers**

There are only a few academic works which examine the Promise Keepers movement. The absence of scholarly literature examining the evangelical men's movement is probably a result of the relative newness of the religious phenomenon. The following section will describe and critique the dominant themes which appear in the academic literature that deals with the Promise Keepers' movement.

#### **Methodology of Research on Promise Keepers**

The academic analyses discussed in this section use similar methodological platforms to examine the Promise Keepers' movement. Linda Kintz (1997), a professor of English, and Becky Beal (1997), a professor of Sport Science, use content analysis of Promise Keepers' books and literature to derive their conclusions. Kintz also attended a Promise Keepers stadium event. Charles Lippy (1997), a professor of Religious Studies, sociologist Michael Messner (1997), and Kenneth Clatterbaugh (1997), a professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies rely on a variety of written sources: the published work of other social scientists, journalistic articles, and Promise

Keepers' literature. Psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (1997) collected her data not only through written sources and by attending a Promise Keepers' conference, but also through discussions with Promise-Keeping men, though it is not clear whether these discussions were part of a systematic, scholarly inquiry or impromptu conversations.

In sum, the academic works which discuss the Promise Keepers movement have been primarily based upon previously written sources. In contrast, research presented in this thesis is, in large part, based upon informal interviews which probe the thoughts and experiences of Promise-Keeping men. Furthermore, the research presented in this thesis is also based upon participant observation of two Promise Keepers' stadium events.

### **Promise Keepers in the Context of Cultural Forces**

When scholars discuss the development of Promise Keepers within a cultural context, several themes emerge: economic influences, individualism, and feminism. Michael Messner (1997), Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (1997), and Charles Lippy (1997) discuss the ways in which changing economic forces have been a factor in the development of Promise Keepers. Van Leeuwen notes that the industrial revolution shifted the locus of work from the home to offices and factories, decreasing men's "control over their own labor and their own families" (Van Leeuwen 1997:239). Moreover, as our society has traditionally associated masculinity with economic power, changes in economic structures, including globalization and technological shifts, have resulted in men's heightened insecurity, leading men to search for methods of



redefining masculinity (Van Leeuwen 1997). Both Lippy and Van Leeuwen point out that even the workplace is no longer "a man's sphere" and, as a result, men are questioning the meaning of male identity (Van Leeuwen 1997, Lippy 1997). Promise Keepers is, according to these scholars, a movement which addresses the current uncertainties surrounding the meaning of masculinity.

Van Leeuwen also asserts that Promise Keepers represents a reaction against the "excesses of individualism," as the men's movement has "proffered religious, psychological, and organizational resources to bring men back into a more communitarian mindset" (Van Leeuwen 1997:243). Like Lippy and Van Leeuwen, Messner views Promise Keepers as a response to changes in gender roles brought on by the feminist movement. As in the case of changing economic structures, the changes in gender roles have led men to question the meaning of male identity. Promise Keepers, according to Messner, is a reaction against the feminist movement, as Promise-Keeping men attempt to reinstate a traditional, patriarchal, familial form (Messner 1997). In contrast, Lippy and Van Leeuwen argue that Promise Keepers appropriates elements of feminist thought (Lippy 1997, Van Leeuwen 1997). The relationship between Promise Keepers and feminism, as discussed in the extant literature, will be examined in greater detail below, in the section entitled "Promise Keepers and Feminism."

### **Promise Keepers in the Context of Religious and Secular Men's Movements**

Several articles which examine Promise Keepers compare and contrast the Promise Keepers movement with the mythopoetic men's movement and the Men and

Religion Forward movement. Beginning in the 1980s, the mythopoetic men's movement, whose members were mostly "white, middle-aged, heterosexual, and of the professional class," strove "to guide men on spiritual journeys aimed at rediscovering and reclaiming 'the deep masculine' parts of themselves that they believed had been lost" (Messner 1997:17). In his comparison of the mythopoetic men's movement with the Promise Keepers, Messner argues that

...both groups see a need for men to retreat from women to create spiritually based homosocial rituals through which they can collectively recapture a lost or strayed "true manhood." And these movements are asserting men's responsibility to retake their natural positions of leadership in their communities" (Messner 1997:17).

While both the mythopoetic movement and Promise Keepers involve a "retreat from women," Messner notes that there are two significant differences between the two men's movements. First, unlike the mythopoetic movement's "'loose' gender essentialism," Promise Keepers adheres to a "biblical essentialism," which uses biblical texts to support the notion that women and men have "essentially fixed and categorically different natures" (Messner 1997:27). Second, whereas members of the mythopoetic movement "are seeking to rediscover a premodern, preindustrial essence of manhood," the Promise Keepers movement supports a conception of the traditional family "based on a God-given division of labor" (Messner 1997:31).

Van Leeuwen notes that both Promise Keepers and the mythopoetic movement have similar demographic profiles, as the majority of the men who are involved in the movements are white. Moreover, the median age of the men involved with the mythopoetic movement is 40, whereas the median age of the men who attend a

Promise Keepers stadium event is 38 (Van Leeuwen 1997). Van Leeuwen argues that both movements address the uncertainties surrounding male identity that arise from economic changes during the past century. Van Leeuwen's description of the differences between the two men's movements differs markedly from Messner's analysis. Unlike the mythopoetic movement's tendency to blame women for troubled manhood, Promise Keepers "sends a strongly evangelical message of personal repentance and conversion" (Van Leeuwen 1997:240). In contrast to Messner, Van Leeuwen argues that the mythopoetic movement attempts to re-establish a traditional form of masculinity, whereas "Promise Keepers appropriates the feminist critique of stereotypical masculinity and re-clothes it in a biblical theology of true manhood" (Van Leeuwen 1997:241).

Messner, Lippy, and Kenneth Clatterbaugh (1997) note that Promise Keepers is not entirely a novel phenomenon, since it parallels the Men and Religion Forward movement which conducted mass rallies in cities around the United States from 1911 to 1912 (Clatterbaugh 1997). Messner writes that "there is a historical ebb and flow of overt masculinity politics within fundamentalist Christianity" (Messner 1997:24). After the first wave of feminism at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Men and Religion Forward movement, referred to as "Muscular Christianity," developed in "response to a crisis of masculinity brought on by feminism, modernization, and widespread fears that boys and men were becoming 'feminized'" (Messner 1997:25). Promise Keepers, according to Messner, is a response to the second wave of feminism (Messner 1997).

According to Lippy, organizers of the Men and Religion Forward movement attempted to counter the perceived connections between religion and emotion, and between religion and the sphere of women, by presenting a conception of Christianity centred around efficient, action-oriented engagement in social service projects. Like Messner, Lippy views the Men and Religion Forward movement as a reaction to "the changes in gender roles that marked the late nineteenth century" (Lippy 1997:292). With the development of capitalist industrial society, men began working outside of the home and were now responsible to an employer. This new-found responsibility resulted in a "loss of control" (Lippy 1997:292). For men who were uncertain of their status and role in society, the Men and Religion Forward provided a manly, action-oriented identity. Promise Keepers, like Men and Religion Forward, can be seen as a reaction to changing gender roles. Lippy argues that the increasing number of families maintained by women with no husband, the increasing number of women in the workforce, and the growth of the women's movement, "all raise questions about male identity, questions that are complicated for many men by the continuing belief that expression of religious feeling is more appropriate for women than for them" (Lippy 1997:299). In response to the uncertainty surrounding male identity, Promise Keepers extols the conception of the ideal man as someone who "is sensitive, faithful, inclusive, and committed" (Lippy 1997:300).

### **Promise Keepers and Feminism**

Van Leeuwen and Clatterbaugh write about the elusive references to feminism in Promise Keepers' literature:

Almost nothing is said - either positive or negative - about feminists or the feminist movement in Promise Keepers' assorted literature (Van Leeuwen 1997:239).

When feminism is mentioned in Promise Keepers literature it is rarely defined, and it is never seen as positive (Clatterbaugh 1997:182).

Messner, Clatterbaugh, and Van Leeuwen view Promise Keepers as a response to feminism, though the three scholars differ in how they interpret this response.

Messner writes that Promise Keepers represents a "feminist backlash," as the men's movement attempts to reassert a traditional conception of the familial structure (Messner 1997:31). Clatterbaugh points to the ambivalence of Promise Keepers' position toward feminism. He notes that although Promise Keepers views feminism as a "godless movement" and asserts that the feminist agenda runs counter to Promise Keepers' ideology, the men's movement's agenda contains "a gesture in the direction of feminism with the central idea that men have not kept their promises to women: Men have not been good providers and protectors, and men have not treated women, especially their wives, with respect" (Clatterbaugh 1997:179). Van Leeuwen paints a more favourable portrait of Promise Keepers' relationship to feminism, as she contends that Promise Keepers appropriates elements of feminist ideology. In light of this appropriation, Van Leeuwen rejects the notion of Promise Keepers as a backlash against feminism:

The Promise Keepers movement provides a supportive yet challenging environment in which - much as 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" (Van Leeuwen 1997:254).

Similarly, Lippy alludes to the ways in which Promise Keepers ideology displays sensitivity to the feminist agenda:

The Promise Keeper is sensitive, faithful, inclusive, and committed; echoing the theme of the 1996 conferences, he breaks down walls and barriers - between spouses, within families, and across racial and denominational lines... virtues viable only in a post-industrial society where women and the ideals associated with feminization are not confined to the four walls of the home or the churches (Lippy 1997:300).

My own research on the attitudes of promise-keeping men toward feminist issues and organizations supports Van Leeuwen's assertion that Promise Keepers appropriates elements of feminist ideology.

### **The Construction of Gender in the Promise Keepers' Movement**

As mentioned above, Messner argues that Promise Keepers involves an attempt to reassert a traditional, patriarchal family structure. Moreover, Promise Keepers, according to Messner, also represents an attempt to promote male leadership outside the family structure, in the community and the church. Messner argues that women supporters of Promise Keepers attempt to tame their husbands with "patriarchal bargains." That is, "in return for a domesticated, responsible masculinity, Christian women concede to a clear gendered division of labor (usually with their taking of the vast majority of the housework and child care, even if they are also in the paid labor force) and they concede formal leadership of the family to the man" (Messner 1997:34).

In "The Promise Keepers' Use of Sport in Defining 'Christlike' Masculinity," Becky Beal (1997) uses "a critical feminist analysis" to examine the ways in which Promise Keepers' literature uses sport imagery and metaphors to construct a particular

view of masculinity. Promise Keepers uses sport imagery and metaphors, according to Beal, to support an ideology of male superiority (Beal 1997). Specifically, Beal argues that Promise Keepers uses sport to demonstrate "qualities of masculinity that are linked with superior leadership", "to rally men around male superiority", and "to conjure mental images of male superiority" (Beal 1997:274).

Van Leeuwen writes that "at this point in its organizational development, Promise Keepers is nothing if not contradictory in the messages it sends forth about gender relations" (Van Leeuwen 1997:250). At times Promise Keepers literature emphasizes "equality of leadership" while at others the literature is explicitly patriarchal (Van Leeuwen 1997:250). Van Leeuwen suggests four possible reasons for this contradiction in Promise Keepers' gender ideology. First, the movement adopts a patriarchal ideology out of "sheer force of habit" (Van Leeuwen 1997:250). As the movement has experienced meteoric growth, it has not had the chance to develop an official position on gender equality. Second, "the organization has allowed - if not deliberately fostered - an ambiguous view of gender relations for pragmatic and/or theological reasons" (Van Leeuwen 1997:250). In an attempt to reach as many people as possible with the message of Promise Keepers, the men's movement has adopted an ambiguous view of gender relations, appealing both to Christians who embrace gender equality and to those who maintain a patriarchal ideology: "Each listener can hear what he or she wants in them: a message of egalitarian, mutual servanthood or one of reclaimed male headship" (Van Leeuwen 1997:251). Third,

Promise Keepers has fostered an ambiguous gender ideology as "a means/end distinction":

...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 (Van Leeuwen 1997:251).

Fourth, "Promise Keepers' deeper tendency is to become an organization -- like 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" (Van Leeuwen 1997:252).

My own research suggests that, while the patriarchal theme of "re-claiming male authority" is present in Promise Keepers' ideology, many Promise-Keeping men adopt an egalitarian conception of gender roles and, as a result, it is incorrect to label the entire movement as patriarchal. The research presented in this thesis supports Van Leeuwen's assertion that Promise Keepers' ideology is ambiguous, simultaneously supporting egalitarian and patriarchal conceptions of the roles of men and women. Moreover, like Van Leeuwen, I propose that Promise Keepers maintains an ambiguous gender ideology for pragmatic reasons, developing an ideology which appeals not only to Promise-Keeping men who adhere to an egalitarian view of the roles of men and women, but also to those who support a patriarchal perspective on gender relations.

### **Summary of Research on Promise Keepers**

Messner's assertion that Promise Keepers is opposed to feminism must be re-examined in light of the sensitivity of Promise Keepers to feminist issues highlighted



by Clatterbaugh (1997) and Van Leeuwen (1997). Messner and Beal discuss the patriarchal aspects of Promise Keepers' gender ideology, while Van Leeuwen states that Promise Keepers' depiction of men's and women's roles is contradictory, as the men's movement boasts egalitarian and patriarchal gender ideologies.

The lack of consensus among scholars regarding Promise Keepers' stance toward feminism and gender roles, coupled with the absence of systematic inquiry into the perceptions and experiences of promise-keeping men point to the need for academic analysis to bring clarity to these issues using a rigorous and systematic methodological platform. *This thesis responds to this absence of systematic scholarly inquiry.* Through informal interviews and participant observation of Promise Keepers conferences, my research focusses on the extent to which promise-keeping men support notions of gender equality and the ways in which these men appropriate feminist ideology. My research methodology is the focus of the following section.

### **Methodology**

On a Saturday afternoon in the fall of 1996, I was driving through downtown Hamilton, Ontario and found myself in a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam. That experience in traffic was my first encounter with members of the Promise Keepers movement, as thousands of men left the first Hamilton Promise Keepers conference held at a local stadium, the Copps Coliseum. Over the next year, I read many journalistic articles about the evangelical men's movement and spoke with friends who had attended one or more of the conference events. Throughout this time, I developed

an interest in studying this movement of men which is often discussed as "controversial."

I began my research among Promise Keepers in southern Ontario in March 1998. At first, my research progressed slowly. Initially, I had wanted to meet with Eric,<sup>4</sup> the local "ambassador" who keeps individuals in the city of Guelph and surrounding townships informed about Promise Keepers' events. I had hoped that Eric would be able to provide me with the names and phone numbers of men in the local area who were actively involved with Promise Keepers. I spoke with Eric over the telephone on several different occasions. During our first phone conversation, he asked me a number of questions which probed my intentions in studying Promise Keepers. I assured Eric that I wanted to understand Promise Keepers from the perspective of those who attend the stadium events and that I did not have a hidden motive for studying the men's movement. Eric agreed to meet with me and told me that he would phone me back to arrange a meeting. After a week had passed and he had not phoned me, I called Eric. Again, Eric agreed to meet with me, told me that he would phone me later in the week to arrange a meeting, but did not call. I phoned Eric one last time. Yet again, Eric agreed to meet with me and, this time, he suggested that we meet over breakfast. I tried to get Eric to arrange a time and place, but he would not agree to a specific appointment. Instead, Eric promised that he would phone me to arrange a meeting, but never did.

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<sup>4</sup>I have used a pseudonym in place of the actual name of each respondent.

I am not sure why Eric would not meet with me, though it seemed as though he was suspicious of my intentions as a researcher. In studying Promise Keepers, I often encountered Promise-Keeping men who seemed suspicious of my intentions and the nature of my research. I imagine that the inaccurate portrayals of Promise Keepers by some journalists and a few academics have helped to create this suspicion of researchers amongst many Promise Keepers. Eventually, I managed to arrange a few interviews with Promise-Keeping men through a church located close to my home. Aware that some men might be wary of my intentions as a researcher, I began each interview by clearly outlining the direction of my research and by stating that I was interested in understanding Promise Keepers from the perspective of those who are involved with the movement. Moreover, to minimize suspicion, I also encouraged Promise-Keeping men to ask me questions about myself and my research. Many of the men I encountered asked about my own religious beliefs. When I informed them that I was a *Christian*, these men seemed to relax. At the beginning of one interview a respondent engaged me in a discussion of apologetics, attempting to reconcile evangelical belief with secular philosophy. After he asked me about my own religious beliefs and I told him about my Christian faith, the respondent ceased talking in terms of apologetics and immediately began to discuss his experiences as a Promise Keeper.

In gathering information about Promise Keepers, I used two qualitative research methods; *informal interviewing and participant observation*. In conducting informal interviews, I asked a series of questions related to my theoretical framework, yet I was not restricted to a pre-defined set of questions. Instead, I continually reformulated my

questions as I gained new and relevant data from respondents. Informal interviews enabled me to explore the respondents' construction of gender roles in a depth not possible through self-administered questionnaires. From March to October 1998, I interviewed 20 promise keepers who reside in southwestern Ontario. All of the interviews were conducted in a pleasant, casual manner. While at the outset of the interview some men seemed dubious about my intentions as a researcher, I did not encounter any points of tension during any of the interviews. All of the men I interviewed responded to the questions openly, sharing personal thoughts and experiences without hesitation. At times, however, I felt as though some of the respondents' answers were rehearsed, as if these men had been asked frequently to recount their experiences in the movement. The majority of interviews were conducted in doughnut and coffee shops.

Over time, the questions I asked during the informal interviews changed. Some of my initial questions elicited glib responses and all of the respondents seemed to give the same answers. For instance, when asked to recount the main purpose of Promise Keepers, most men described the Seven Promises. As well, while I was initially interested in exploring the sense of religious order presented by the Promise Keepers movement, after a few informal interviews I began to develop an interest in the ways in which Promise-Keeping men view the roles of men and women. Having read accounts of the movement by social scientists and journalists which describe Promise Keepers as patriarchal and anti-feminist, I encountered many men whose construction of gender roles displayed sensitivity to the feminist agenda. As a result

of this discovery of sensitivity to feminism, I decided to centre the interviews around the respondents' views of the roles of men and women.

I believe that the data which I gained from the informal interviews are credible. The respondents represent a variety of different church affiliations: Fellowship Baptist, Convention Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical Brethren, and Mennonite Brethren. Before I conducted the interviews, I was unaware of any of the respondents' views and, as a result, I did not select only those respondents who represented one particular perspective.

The average age of the respondents was 42. The youngest man I interviewed was 27, while the oldest was 71. All but one of the men were married. Of the eighteen men with children, the majority had two or three children. All of the men I interviewed had at least some post-secondary education. Six men attended a Bible College or Seminary and the remaining men undertook their educational training at a secular College or University. All of the men were Canadians, with the exception of one U.S. citizen. The majority of the respondents were white, English-speaking Canadians. Their occupations were primarily in the business or blue collar sectors, with occupational titles ranging from "Sales and Marketing" to "Electrician." Four of the men worked full-time for Christian organizations. Nine respondents grew up in Christian families, while nine others described their upbringing as irreligious. Two men did not identify their families as Christian, but described the households in which they grew up as "church-going" and as "nominal Christians."

Participant observation is a technique whereby the researcher observes and engages in the activities which s/he is researching in order to gain an understanding of the research setting (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). I used participant observation to study two conference events. Originally, I had also intended to use participant observation to gather information about the *Promise Keepers'* accountability groups, the meetings where five to ten men conduct a Bible study and help each other to remain committed to the Seven Promises. Having learned the names of several men involved in accountability groups, I asked these men if I could observe their groups over the course of several weeks. These men seemed hesitant to welcome me to their meetings. On each occasion, the Promise Keeper told me that he would have to ask the group members if they would feel comfortable having someone observe their meetings. As these men did not return my phone calls, I suspect that the group members were not comfortable having an observer join the meeting. Later, I discovered that many of these accountability groups are comprised of two or three members and that, during the meetings, the men share personal struggles with one another. Given the intimate nature of these accountability groups, I am not surprised that I was unable to have the opportunity to observe their meetings. Moreover, my youth and unmarried status may have been factors prohibiting my access to the accountability groups, as the men in these groups may only feel comfortable sharing their personal struggles with others who can relate to their experience as husbands and fathers. During the informal interviews, however, I asked the men to talk about their accountability groups. Not only did the interviews provide me with valuable data

concerning these groups, but they also enabled me to discover that many of these groups have little or no association with the Promise Keepers movement (the small groups are often formed by fellow church members or friends who may not have attended a Promise Keepers event) and that many Promise-Keeping men do not belong to an accountability group.

The first conference I attended was held at the Pontiac Silverdome in Detroit from Friday May 15th to Saturday May 16th 1998. I travelled to and attended the conference with a group of 14 men from southwestern Ontario, all of whom were aware of my status as a researcher. During the weeks which followed the conference, I was able to interview many of these men, gaining valuable information about their experience at the Detroit event.<sup>5</sup> The second conference I attended was held at a hockey arena in Kitchener, Ontario from Friday September 18th to Saturday September 19th 1998. As this conference was held a short distance from my home, I travelled to and attended the event by myself. I obtained a media pass for the Kitchener conference, a laminated card which I fixed to the front pocket of my shirt. In an attempt to avoid the ethical implications of conducting covert research (and since I was not attending the conference with men who had previously been informed of my status as an observer), the media pass enabled others at the conference to be aware of my status as an outsider.

The data I gained through participant observation complements the information I obtained through the informal interviews. While informal interviews provided me

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<sup>5</sup>These interviews are among the twenty interviews mentioned earlier.

with the opportunity to conduct an in-depth exploration of the respondents' thoughts and experiences, my fieldwork as a participant observer enabled me to examine first-hand the activities which take place at a Promise Keepers' stadium event, the focus of the following chapter.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **THE PROMISE KEEPERS' STADIUM EVENT AS A PILGRIMAGE**

The principal medium through which Promise Keepers conveys its message is the stadium event, a pilgrimage in which thousands of men gather together to sing hymns, listen to speakers, and participate in small group prayer. Each year, Promise Keepers' stadium events centre around a stated theme. In 1996, the theme was "Break Down the Walls," in reference to the barriers that exist in a man's life: between a man and God, his wife, his children, and between himself and men of other racial backgrounds and religious denominations. In 1998, the theme was "Living a Legacy: Make a Difference in Your Lifetime," encouraging men to live a Christian life that will be remembered by subsequent generations.

This section will discuss Promise Keepers' stadium events in light of a theoretical exploration of pilgrimage and my field experience attending a Promise Keepers' stadium event held in Detroit, Michigan, May 15th to 16th 1998. First, I will examine theoretical works which explore pilgrimage. Second, I will provide a detailed account of my field experience attending this event. Third, I will use the theoretical works which explore pilgrimage to analyze Promise Keepers' stadium events.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

In discussing the symbolic representation of time, anthropologist Edmund Leach describes calendrical festivals as "a temporary shift from the Normal-Profane

order of existence into the Abnormal-Sacred order and back again" (Leach [1961] 1979:228). Those who participate in these festivals experience a change in status from profane to sacred, then from sacred to profane. According to Leach, the individual who participates in a calendrical ritual goes through four phases. First, the individual undergoes the "rite of sacralization," a transference to the sacred realm (Leach [1961] 1979:228). Second, the individual experiences a marginal, sacred state. Third, the individual undergoes the process of desacralization, whereby s/he returns to the profane world. Finally, in the fourth phase the individual engages in "normal secular life, the interval between successive festivals" (Leach [1961] 1979:228).

Presenting a related argument, anthropologists Edith Turner and Victor Turner describe the work of Arnold van Gennep, a folklorist and ethnographer. Van Gennep asserts that there are three phases to a rite of passage: separation, limen or margin, and aggregation (Turner and Turner 1978:2). During the first phase, the individual or group becomes detached "from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a relatively stable set of cultural conditions" (Turner and Turner 1978:2). The liminal phase brings the individual "through a realm or dimension that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state, he is betwixt or between all familiar lines of classification" or structures (Turner and Turner 1978:2). Finally, the phase of aggregation involves a process whereby "the passage is consummated and the subject returns to classified secular or mundane life" (Turner and Turner 1978:2, see also Turner 1969).

The first three phases of Leach's account of the festival experience are almost identical to van Gennep's three phases of a rite of passage. However, whereas Leach describes calendrical events and, therefore, discusses a fourth phase as the interval between "successive festivals," van Gennep develops the three phases to describe a rite of passage, an event which the individual is likely to experience only once.

Pilgrimage, according to Victor Turner, possesses many of the same characteristics as a rite of passage, as the pilgrim often engages in "initiatory rituals" (Turner 1974:182). More specifically, pilgrimage is a "form of institutionalized or symbolic anti-structure (or perhaps meta-structure) which succeeds the major initiation rites of puberty in tribal societies as the dominant historical form" (Turner 1974:182). Turner and Turner write that, like a rite of passage, a pilgrimage possesses many "attributes of liminality:"

... release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behaviour; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual (Turner and Turner 1978:34).

Since, however, participation in pilgrimage is voluntary, Turner and Turner argue that the individual engaged in a pilgrimage should be referred to as "liminoid," differentiating the concept from van Gennep's development of the term "liminal," a term which is used to describe obligatory rites of passage (Turner and Turner 1978:35). Both terms, however, refer to the fact that participants in a ritual are temporarily removed from the rule-governed, hierarchical structures of normal,

mundane experience. Moreover, liminal and liminoid participants are likely to experience *communitas*: a social bond in which individuals, removed of roles and statuses, experience a sense of egalitarianism and shared humanity (Turner 1969).

In his analysis of pilgrimage, Victor Turner argues "that while the total situation fosters the emergence of existential *communitas*, it is normative *communitas* that constitutes the characteristic social bond among pilgrims and between pilgrims and those who offer the help and hospitality on their holy journey" (Turner 1974:169-70). Existential *communitas* refers to "the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogeneous, unstructured, and free community" (Turner 1974:169). Normative *communitas* occurs when "under the influence of time, the need to mobilize resources to keep the members of a group alive and thriving, and the necessity for social control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals, the original existential *communitas* is organized into a perduring social system" (Turner 1974:169). Pilgrimage is characterized by normative *communitas* since pilgrimage often involves the organization of large numbers of people travelling, at times, across a vast geography. Moreover, *communitas*, as experienced within pilgrimage, is limited by the structures of the religious system within which the pilgrimage is generated (Turner 1974:205-6).

Pilgrimage, according to Victor Turner, "removes the sting" of structural divisions. That is, pilgrimage "liberates the individual from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and role, defines him as an integral human being with a capacity

for free choice, and within the limits of his religious orthodoxy presents for him a living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood" (Turner 1974:207). At a pilgrimage center, the "believing actor" desires to have "a direct experience of the sacred, invisible, or supernatural order, either in the material aspect of miraculous healing or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirit or personality" (Turner 1974:197).

Writing in the early 1990s, anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow have criticized the determinism of Turner's approach to pilgrimage. According to Eade and Sallnow, Turner's work "not only prejudices the complex character of the phenomenon but also imposes a spurious homogeneity on the practice of pilgrimage in widely differing historical and cultural settings" (Eade and Sallnow 1991:5). Eade and Sallnow argue that pilgrimage should be viewed as "a realm of competing discourses" (Eade and Sallnow 1991:5). Pilgrims may interpret the meaning of a shrine in a number of differing, if not contradictory, ways and, as a result, pilgrimage can be the location, not only of "consensus and communitas," but also of "conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups" (Eade and Sallnow 1991:2). A shrine, therefore, may not necessarily derive its power from its ability to create consensus amongst a heterogeneous group of pilgrims, but may be seen as powerful because of its ability to accommodate a plurality of meanings and practices (Eade and Sallnow 1991:15).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A shrine's ability to be viewed as powerful by accommodating various meanings and practices will be evident in the examination of *Promise Keepers'* discussion of gender, the focus of the fourth chapter.

Eade and Sallnow's account explains the phenomenon of pilgrimage as it takes place within pluralistic societies (Coleman and Elsner 1995:202). Eade and Sallnow's work, therefore, provides a useful tool with which to analyze the Promise Keepers' stadium event, a religious pilgrimage occurring within a pluralistic context. Promise Keepers' stadium events are dissimilar to traditional pilgrimage sites, as the men's movement's events do not have a fixed location and may be held at different stadiums or arenas each year. Eade and Sallnow differentiate between "place-centred" and "person-centred" sacredness (Eade and Sallnow 1991:6-7). In the former case, the sacred power is found in a physical setting and this sacred power does not change locations. In the latter case, sacred power is found in "the inherent sanctity of a holy person" and this person is not necessarily fixed to a particular geographical location (Eade and Sallnow 1991:6). Promise Keepers' stadium events are person-centred pilgrimage sites, since men travel to these events, often held at different locations each year, to hear well-known *Christian men conduct seminars*.

### **The Detroit Stadium Event 1998**

I arranged to attend the Detroit conference with a group of 13 men, most of whom attend the same evangelical church. I arrived at our designated meeting place, the parking lot of an evangelical church located in a small southern Ontario city, at 3pm on a Friday afternoon. Some of the men had already arrived and, having taken my luggage out of the trunk of my car, I greeted the men and learned their names.

After a few minutes of small talk, we packed our things into two cars and travelled to another city where we met the other members of our group.

At this point, I switched vehicles and travelled the rest of the way in a minivan with three other men. Kyle, the driver, was forty-five years old, married, with one teenage daughter. Paul was thirty years old, married, with two young boys. Rick was twenty-seven years old, single, with a girlfriend. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Rick and myself, all of the other eleven men in our convoy were married with children. Furthermore, of those men, most had young children. It also seemed as though the majority of the men were employed in the business sector. Along with myself, two of the men had not previously attended a Promise Keepers conference.

On the way to Detroit, Kyle and Paul conversed most of the way. They talked about cars, Paul's potential career change, churches, and previous trips to Promise Keepers events. Half-way to Detroit, our convoy stopped to eat at a fast food restaurant. Conversations between men seemed light-hearted and full of jokes, with the men's humour frequently centring around Kyle's inability to follow directions. We arrived at the hotel in Detroit around 5:30 pm, arranged the sleeping accommodations, dropped our luggage in the rooms, and immediately headed to the conference. We entered the Pontiac Silverdome just before 6 pm, securing our seating on the first section of bleachers, stage right, minutes before the conference was scheduled to begin. Seeing that the seats on the ground floor as well as the first section of bleachers were only about half-filled (the second and third sections of bleachers were empty), Kyle exclaimed "This must be so disappointing for them." At the beginning

of the conference, the announcer declared that "Apparently, due to highway construction, many men are still on their way," as if to apologize for the poor turn-out. About one hour into the conference, the stadium appeared only half-filled, with approximately *thirty-five thousand men in attendance*. At a few points in the conference, men reminisced about the Detroit event two years previously, when the Pontiac Silverdome was apparently filled to capacity with approximately seventy thousand men in attendance. Kyle, in an attempt to explain the decline in attendance, said: "Two years ago there were only a few conferences across the U.S., but now, there are nineteen conferences. *With many more conferences, the Detroit event draws men from a smaller area.*"

The conference began, as scheduled, shortly after 6 pm. After a brief welcome, there was a period of singing. A white man in his twenties, dressed in a Promise Keepers' polo shirt, with a well-groomed haircut and a permanent look of elation on his face, led the times of singing. The band which accompanied the singing included many instruments: a piano, a synthesizer, a drum kit, guitars, and a bass; as well as lead and back-up vocalists. Many of the songs that were sung were popular hymns and most of the music was available prior to the conference on Promise Keepers recordings. The words of the hymns, a mixture of traditional and contemporary-sounding, recently written hymns, were printed on the lower edge of the two large projection screens located above the stage. On the upper portion of the projection screens, one could view a close-up of the worship leader, the back-up singers, or the choir in various postures of worship. Sometimes, they appeared with eyes pointed



upward, or with hands extended toward the ceiling. Always, they appeared to be singing with extreme sincerity. Two of the three back-up singers were African-American and the choir was a mixture of Caucasian and African-American men, as well as a mixture of older and younger men. At several points in the conference, Spanish was used for announcements and hymns.<sup>7</sup>

On the floor of the stadium at the opposite end from the stage, two areas were sectioned off, a large blue area and a small white area. The small, white area boasted a sign which read "prayer booth," while the large blue area, the inside of which was visible from the upper stands, sold Promise Keepers' resources. During the singing and intermissions, the resource section opened. When it was open, the resource section appeared crowded with men attempting to make purchases from the impressive array of Promise Keepers' products. Several styles of hats, golf shirts, jackets, and other clothing items were available, each item boasting the "PK: Men of Integrity" logo. The Promise Keeper consumer was also able to purchase Promise Keepers' endorsed books which were being sold below the suggested retail price. If the inside resource section proved too crowded, men could venture outside the stadium and into a large tent filled with tables of books, music, and clothing. The resource section and tent were complete with computerized cash registers where one could purchase items using cash, Visa, or Mastercard. Next to the resource tent, there was a smaller tent which included booths from many Christian organizations: Focus on the Family,

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<sup>7</sup>Evangelical Protestantism has experienced rapid growth in Latin America (Martin 1990, Stoll 1990). It is likely that many evangelical immigrants to the United States from Latin America attend Promise Keepers' conferences and, as a result, Promise Keepers uses Spanish for announcements and hymns.

Knox Presbyterian Seminary, Maranatha Music, and some mission organizations.

Throughout the conference, both of these tents appeared to be fairly crowded.

The ritual leaders at a stadium event are usually pastors from churches with large congregations, missionaries, sports heroes turned Christian workers, or well-known figures from the Christian media. As is typical for a stadium event, the Friday night program at the Detroit conference consisted of two evening seminars. First, Pastor Greg Laurie who is the Senior Pastor at Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California, spoke and conducted an "altar call." In the altar call, men were invited to commit their lives to Christ either for the first time, or as a "prodigal child." Cheered on by the men in the stands, several thousand men made their way to the front of the stage. Special counsellors with large yellow stickers bearing the letters "EV" (evangelistic team) awaited the men. These counsellors were available to pray with the men and passed out Promise Keepers' New Testaments. Greg Laurie announced that, for the first time at a Promise Keepers event, there would be a second altar call on Saturday evening. As a result, the men were instructed to bring their "unsaved" friends to the following day's seminars.

The second speaker, Joseph Garlington, an African American and the Senior Pastor at The Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, addressed the topic of "Life's Dilemma: What Really Matters," encouraging his listeners to examine their personal priorities. Many of the men I had accompanied to Detroit remembered Joseph Garlington from previous Promise Keepers conferences and were excited to hear him speak again. Kyle exclaimed "This guy is excellent, he's really funny."

The evening finished around 10 pm and all the men slowly exited to the parking lot. After a quick stop at the hotel, we went out to eat at a "T.G.I.F." restaurant. Once we sat down at the table and our drinks were delivered, there appeared to be two groupings of men. The men who ordered alcoholic beverages had sat down at one end of the table, while those who ordered non-alcoholic beverages were grouped at the other. On the ride home, Kyle speculated that this arrangement was somewhat deliberate: knowing that some of the men were not comfortable with alcohol consumption, the men who wanted to order alcohol sat together.

After the late dinner, we travelled back to the hotel and we all went to our respective rooms. Two rooms contained two double beds and a cot, each room's accommodations shared among five men. I shared my room, containing two double beds, with three other men. Paul, a large man approximately 6'3" tall and myself, 6'0" tall, were going to share a bed. Fortunately, he opted for the floor, realizing that both of us would not be able to sleep comfortably on the same double bed.

Saturday morning, we awoke at 6:30 am, packed our belongings, and grabbed a quick breakfast in the hotel lobby. Arriving at the stadium at 7:30 am, we chose to sit directly facing the stage in the first section of seating. Until approximately 9:00 am, men entered the stadium in a steady stream until there appeared to be slightly more men in attendance than on the previous night.

Shortly after 8 am, the worship leader, along with his band, choir, and back-up singers, led the men in singing some hymns. Bill McCartney shared a vision for the new millennium, encouraging the men to consider attending one of the New Year's

events scheduled for January 1, 2000. Following the typical conference style, the morning program consisted of two seminars. First, David Castro, Director of Global Outreach Ministries, spoke on "Living a Legacy on the Homefront." Many of the Canadian men referred to Castro as a "screecher." This term refers to a particular preaching style in which the speaker conveys his message through loud tones, including yelling. When Castro began to speak, many of the Canadian men chose to visit the outdoor resource tent. I suspect that the Canadians' dislike for "screeching" represents a cultural difference between Canadian and American evangelical practice.

Second, Bill Nix, founder and President of Faith@Work//inc., spoke on "Living a Legacy in the Workplace" and "Debt-Free Living." Between the morning seminars, there was a "practicum" in which men were asked to gather in small groups of three or four to discuss some issues surrounding family life. At several moments during the conference, the men were asked to place their arm around the "brother" next to them. Similarly, at other times, participants were asked to hold hands during prayers or hymns. All of the men seemed to comply.

At lunch, the men who had pre-purchased a meal were instructed to exit the stadium to pick up their food. The lunches were served in an impressive manner, as volunteers handed out thousands of lunches in a matter of fifteen minutes. The Canadian men gathered together on the grass to eat. The men spoke of cars and church life. I did not hear any specific conversations concerning the morning's seminars.

After lunch, there was a brief half hour concert performed by Ron Winans, a member of an African American family of singers well known in Christian circles. There were two seminars in the afternoon. First, Bishop Philip Porter, an African American and Senior Pastor at All Nations Church of God in Christ located in Denver, Colorado, gave a seminar entitled "Leaving a Legacy of Unity in the Church." Second, Pastor James Ryle, the Senior Pastor at Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Longmont Colorado, gave a seminar entitled "Living a Godly Legacy" and conducted an altar call at the end of the conference. During the altar call, as men walked down the aisles to the front of the stage area, the remaining men would stand, cheer, and clap in excitement. Jim, one of the Canadian men, had been attending church but had not "officially" become a Christian. Without saying anything to the other men, Jim slipped out of his seat, walked down to the stage area, and joined several thousand others who had responded to the altar call. One of the Canadian men noticed that Jim had joined the men at the stage area and, in an excited tone of voice, turned to the other Canadian men and said "Jim went down to the front! I wasn't sure if he was going to turn left, up the stairs for another cigarette, or right, down the stairs for Jesus." Throughout the altar call, the Canadian men stood to keep a close watch on Jim. Ascending the steps from the stage area, Jim carried a Promise Keepers' New Testament and wore a definite smile on his face. The Canadian men, excited by his response to the altar call, embraced Jim, calling him "brother" and welcoming him into their spiritual family.

As the altar call was ending, the resource section re-opened and a flood of men entered to buy books and resources, since this would be their last opportunity to make purchases at the conference. Several of the Canadian men cringed at the number of men entering the resource section so quickly after the altar call. Greg, one of the organizers of the trip, remarked sarcastically "Now that they are saved, give me a tape!"

Many of the volunteers at the conference were women. I noticed that the resource section and tent seemed to be run by women volunteers. Women also helped to serve the men lunch. At one point, Bill McCartney's wife Linda, referred to as "the first lady of Promise Keepers," was asked to stand. As her smiling face appeared on the projection screens above the stage, the crowd cheered. I also noticed that there was one woman sitting in the crowd on the floor seating of the stadium, who appeared to be a spectator rather than a volunteer.

At the end of the conference, the men slowly left the stadium for the parking lot. When heading home, we gathered into the same travel groups in which we had travelled to the conference. Rick, Paul, and Kyle talked briefly about the conference, but most of the conversation on the way home centred on various issues including abortion, drinking, marriage, and cars. Kyle felt the conference had been one of the best he had ever attended. As Rick phoned his girlfriend from his cellular phone to inquire about her well-being, Paul and Kyle commented on how Rick would make an excellent husband. All of the men had planned to stop for a "sit down" dinner on

Saturday night to debrief from the conference, but Paul and Kyle were eager to return to their families and decided to opt for fast food instead.

### **Promise Keepers' Conferences: Rites of Passage and Calendrical Events**

For some, the Promise Keepers' conference is a rite of passage. Those who attend the conference and respond to the altar call, taking the necessary steps to become a Christian, are engaged in a process of transition which marks the start of their commitment to Christianity. Furthermore, as Messner (1997), Lippy (1997), and Van Leeuwen (1997) have noted, Promise Keepers' ideology responds to contemporary uncertainties which surround the meaning of masculinity. Promise Keepers' ability to define masculinity for its members is noted by some respondents. Gary, a 42 year old business man, makes the following comment:

Promise Keepers has probably defined more of the male context and how we relate to one another and what our responsibilities are.

When asked to describe the core issues which Promise Keepers addresses, Kyle, a 44 year old business man, says:

I would say that [Promise Keepers] is dealing with the man's role... getting the perspective back in life, putting God first and then, after that, putting your wife first... The movement, for lack of a better word, helps a shift to occur in a man's life, if he is willing to be receptive.

For these men, the stadium events seem to serve as a rite of passage, a process through which they adopt a particular view of masculinity.

For the majority of Promise-Keeping men, however, the stadium event is not a rite of passage, but is a calendrical event. Concerning the stadium event, Greg, a 33 year old firefighter, provided the following comment:

To me, it's a big spiritual rejuvenation for the year. If I missed a PK conference, it would be very strange. I've only been going for three years, this is the fourth, but I think if I didn't go, something would be missing in the spring. Its like a rejuvenation of sorts. It sort of pumps you back up so you can last another year. By the time February comes around again, you think "Oh, I'm dying... I need a conference."

In a similar manner, Kyle stated:

I've been... after Boulder... to the Silverdome in Detroit and then to the Carrierdome in Syracuse... to Rich stadium in Buffalo and then back to Pontiac Silverdome again. So, that's four years. Every year... yep... its like going back to the well to be renewed.

The yearly ritual of attending a Promise Keepers conference "rejuvenates" and "renews" these respondents, enabling them to retain their commitments to the seven promises of a Promise Keeper.

Regardless of whether the stadium event is a rite of passage or calendrical ritual, the men who attend the conference participate in a pilgrimage and progress through three phases: sacralization, margin, and desacralization.<sup>8</sup> The following section discusses, in turn, each of these three phases. This section also explores the extent to which Promise Keepers' events provide a forum for contested views of the sacred.

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<sup>8</sup>Given its similarities to Leach's discussion of the four phases of a rite of passage (1979), Turner and Turner's delineation of separation, limen or margin, and aggregation could also be used to analyze the Promise Keepers' stadium event (Turner and Turner 1978:2).



## **Sacralization**

This phase involves the individual's separation from profane life. During the first phase, the individual becomes separated "from an earlier fixed point in the social structure" (Turner and Turner 1978:2). When men travel to a Promise Keepers' conference, they are physically removed from their roles as husbands and fathers. Moreover, they are separated from the demands of work related responsibilities. The trip to the conference is an integral part of the ritual of attending a Promise Keepers stadium event. In the following passage, Greg describes the journey to the conference as a highlight of the ritual activity:

To me, maybe it's just because I am organizing it, but to me the travelling is part of the experience. If you go to a conference in a nearby city, guys will just go listen to the conference and go home. Maybe they will go for a coffee afterwards. But, to me the experience of driving in the van with the guys and then you talk and get to know each other all the way there. Then you drop your stuff off at the hotel and go to the conference, get back and then sit around and talk. Last year, I think that we all sat around, watched a basketball game, had a few beers, and just talked about what the Lord spoke to us about that day. To me, that interaction is almost more important than the conference itself because you can see where other guys are coming from.

## **Margin**

Through this phase, the pilgrim is "betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification" (Turner and Turner 1978:2). Removed from his day-to-day roles, the individual attending a conference adopts a new set of personae: worshipper, religious seeker, and someone who engages in introspection and prayer. While the men may be physically removed from the demands of their "profane" lives, many of the conference speakers encourage the men to consider issues centered around their day-to-day

activities. For instance, one speaker at the Detroit conference presented a seminar entitled "Debt-Free Living," focussing upon financial matters.

During this marginal phase, pilgrims experience a homogenization of status (Turner and Turner 1978:34). Derek, a 40 year old electrician, states that the altar call serves to place everyone at the conference on the same level, providing the men who are not Christians with the opportunity to become believers.

...they always, at least in the U.S., start out with an altar call. Which is good because they separate... well they don't really separate, but they put everyone on the same level. The guys know where they are coming from and then they proceed from there.

Greg remarks upon the universal nature of the topics addressed at a stadium event:

The nice thing for me is that the conference generates conversation amongst the guys that go and you see that everyone is in the same boat as you are.

Paul, a 30 year old account manager, recounts the absence of denominational divisions at Promise Keepers conferences.

I thought it was extremely powerful to see people united there in one faith and in one God and praising together and coming there under the tent of Jesus Christ, rather than under the tent of a denomination.

Randy, a 57 year old retired teacher, describes the Stand in the Gap sacred assembly held at the National Mall, Washington D.C., at which he experienced feelings of commonality with members of other racial and ethnic groups.

We had black men, red men, yellow people, we had white. All different races, different cultures, and just to watch that and to pray with one another made me realize that we may be made up of many different colours, but we are all one body. It was great to see that.

One of the characteristics of the margin phase is that pilgrims dress in a simple manner. At the stadium event in Detroit, many men wore the same Promise Keepers'

shirts, hats, or jackets. Some men toted Promise Keepers' travel mugs. During several of the informal interviews I conducted, I asked about the meaning of these "ritual objects." According to Stuart, a 33 year old missionary, these ritual objects help the men to experience a sense of "belonging."

When you have a PK hat or jacket or whatever... a PK study Bible, you now feel as though you have a sense of belonging. I think that the explanation is that a lot of men don't feel as though they have that sense of belonging, they're kind of an island unto themselves within the body of Christ...

When many men attend a stadium event wearing Promise Keepers' clothing, distinctions between the men begin to disappear. The removal of distinctions through uniform clothing serves to foster a sense of egalitarianism among the men attending the stadium event.

During the margin phase, pilgrims often experience *communitas*. The feelings of togetherness which Paul experienced with Promise Keepers from other denominational backgrounds and which Randy felt with men of other racial and ethnic groups exemplify Turner's ideal of *communitas*. Kyle describes the way in which the atmosphere at a Promise Keepers' stadium event enabled him to share openly about personal matters.

I would never share verbally if I was struggling with anything sexual or anything that I had against a brother. I wouldn't freely give it up. But here I was with men I didn't know and I think to myself, if God has provided this environment and it seems so positive and I really felt a sense of the Holy Spirit, then I'm going to release it. I'm going to be myself and I am going to be honest. It was such a cool sensation to know that I wasn't judged. These other men who didn't even know me supported me in prayer. It was such an uplifting and building experience... that these men would even care for me and pray specifically for that.

When asked to describe a highlight of attending a Promise Keepers' stadium event held in Detroit, Derek explained:

...the singing is great. You get up and sing and there is about seventy thousand men singing. The harmony... the cohesiveness... how everyone got along and could share and pray with each other.

Derek returned to the Detroit conference the following year. This experience, however, was not as positive. Derek recounted the way in which the weather prohibited him from experiencing togetherness with other men at the conference.

...it was a very damp, rainy day. Cold... ugh! The first year we went, we were able to sit outside and eat our lunch. The following year we ran outside, sat in the car, ate lunch, and tried to keep warm. The first year it was nice because all of the guys were outside sprawled out on the grass and they would get to talking and sharing in different groups. But the next year we had to all hustle back into our cars and we were isolated.

Some men do not experience *communitas* at the stadium events. For example, Greg described *an occasion* when some men felt uncomfortable with some of the activities at a stadium event:

We have had guys go one year, they have had to hold someone's hand and then, that's it. They wouldn't go back. They can't bring themselves to do that kind of stuff or share anything.

### **Desacralization**

The journey home from the stadium event provides the men with an opportunity to share their experiences at the conference with one another. In the following excerpt, Derek describes the trip home from a stadium event.

What really stands out in my mind is that men are really not the type to open up and share things, but on the bus on the way home, every guy got up and stood at the front of the bus with a microphone and basically told everyone what it meant to them. It was really neat. That's the advantage to going on a bus.

As mentioned above, during the journey home from the *Detroit conference*, the men in the van in which I travelled spent some time discussing the conference and then began to talk about more mundane concerns. This transition from a discussion of sacred experiences to a conversation centered around day-to-day activities exemplifies the process of desacralization.

### **Contested Views**

The stadium event is, in some ways, "a realm of competing discourses" (Eade and Sallnow 1991:5). As will be discussed in greater detail in a succeeding chapter, Promise Keepers presents an ambiguous gender ideology, one which simultaneously promotes patriarchal and egalitarian notions of the roles of men and women. The men who attend Promise Keepers' stadium events hold differing views on gender issues, with some men adopting egalitarian ideas and others promoting patriarchal concepts. Moreover, these men interpret Promise Keepers' gender ideology in differing ways. On one hand, some men view the movement's discussion of gender as patriarchal. On the other hand, some men believe that those who describe Promise Keepers' gender ideology as patriarchal are misinformed.

As mentioned above, Eade and Sallnow argue that a shrine may be seen as powerful because of its ability to accommodate a plurality of meanings and practices (Eade and Sallnow 1991:15). By maintaining an ambiguous position on gender roles, Promise Keepers draws large groups of men who have differing gender ideologies. The movement's ambiguous notions of gender, therefore, may be powerful symbols that have the ability to draw large groups of men by accommodating a variety of

discrepant perspectives on gender. A discussion of Promise Keepers' ambiguous discourse on gender is developed further in Chapter 4.

### **CHAPTER 3:**

#### **EVANGELICALISM, PROMISE KEEPERS, AND MODERNITY**

According to Peter Berger, religious organizations, faced with an increase in the secularism and pluralism of modern society, are confronted with the task of perpetuating the religious community while surrounded by individuals who do not subscribe to their particular brand of religiosity. Berger writes that religious institutions are presented with "two ideal-typical options:" accommodation or resistance (Berger 1967:153). Through accommodation, religious groups attempt to deal with pluralism "by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands" (Berger 1967:153). That is, religious communities engage in a process of "social engineering," whereby the religious tradition is made "more relevant" to the modern, pluralistic, secular world. The option of resistance takes place when religious organizations refuse to accommodate to the secularizing and pluralistic forces of modernity, clinging to "whatever socio-religious structures they can maintain or construct" and "continuing to profess the old objectivities as much as possible as if nothing had happened" (Berger 1967:153). In adopting the posture of resistance, the religious community creates or maintains an institution which serves "as a viable plausibility structure for reality-definitions that are not confirmed by the larger society" (Berger 1967:156).

Sociologist Stephen Warner refers to Berger's work as the "old paradigm," arguing that Berger's sociological analysis of religion does not adequately account for

the religious climate in the United States. Whereas Berger argues that religious institutions in the modern world are confronted with the task of maintaining their *plausibility structures* while surrounded by individuals who adhere to differing, even oppositional, definitions of reality, Warner notes "that maintaining supernatural religious beliefs in U.S. society is not particularly difficult" (Warner 1993:1053). Moreover, Warner notes that levels of church enrollment grew during rapid periods of modernization (Warner 1993:1048-9). In The Sacred Canopy, Berger describes the process by which a *demonopolized religious institution* adjusts to the secularism and pluralism of society through accommodation and resistance. In contrast, Warner argues that the majority of religious institutions thriving in the U.S. developed in a pluralistic context. Warner develops a "new paradigm" for the sociological study of religious groups in the U.S.. In contrast to the old paradigm, the new one argues that religion thrives in an open market system. In particular, the new paradigm asserts that the disestablishment of churches which followed the development of the U.S. First Amendment resulted in "a far higher level of religious mobilization than had existed before" (Warner 1993:1051).

Regardless of whether modernizing forces have resulted in decreased or increased religiosity, it is possible to discuss the ways in which religious groups have made concessions to modernity.<sup>9</sup> Sociologist James Hunter (1983) examines the manner in which the evangelical worldview has accommodated to the ideological currents of modernity. Modernity, according to Hunter, "is the evitable period in the

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<sup>9</sup>Some argue that contemporary society is post-modern (Bauman 1992).



history of a particular society that is characterized by the institutional and cultural concomitants of a technologically induced economic growth" (Hunter 1983:6). This section summarizes Hunter's analysis of evangelicalism's stance toward modernity, a stance which accommodates some aspects of modern life yet resists others. In addition, I discuss Promise Keepers' ties to evangelicalism and the extent to which Promise Keepers makes concessions to modernizing forces consistent with Hunter's analysis of the wider evangelical movement.

### **Evangelicalism's Ambivalent Reaction to Modernity**

Hunter argues that evangelicals have made concessions to "three structural dimensions of modernity:" functional rationality, cultural pluralism, and structural pluralism (Hunter 1983:73). Functional rationality is, according to Hunter, "the infusion of rational controls through all spheres of human experience" (Hunter 1983:12). Evangelicalism's appropriation of modern rationality is evident in "the increasing tendency to translate the specifically religious components of Evangelical world view, previously understood to be plain, self-evident, and without need of elaboration, into rigorously standardized prescriptions" (Hunter 1983:75). For instance, the well-known tract entitled "The Four Spiritual Laws," written by Campus Crusade for Christ's Bill Bright, presents the conversion process as a tidy procedure (Hunter 1983).

The concept of "cultural pluralism" refers to "the division of society into subsocieties with more or less distinct cultural traditions" (Hunter 1983:13).

Evangelicals appear to oppose the occurrence of cultural pluralism, maintaining their claims to the exclusive possession of religious truth and rejecting the validity of non-evangelical religious and secular ideological perspectives. Evangelicalism, however, has responded to the contemporary trend toward cultural pluralism with a softening of its "cultural demeanour." Evangelicals accentuate the positive aspects and de-emphasize the elements of their religious worldview which tend to be offensive to non-evangelicals. That is, in an encounter with a non-evangelical, evangelicals place an emphasis on "God's love" and de-emphasize "the notions of inherent evil, sinful conduct and lifestyles, the wrath of a righteous and jealous God, and eternal agony and death in hell" (Hunter 1983:87).

Structural pluralism involves "the historically unique dichotomization of life into public and private spheres" (Hunter 1983:13). The processes of structural pluralism relegate the relevance of religiosity to the private sphere. Evangelicalism makes some concessions to the forces of structural pluralism in its "concern with the emotional and psychological dimensions of human experience" (Hunter 1983:94). This concern for modern dimensions of human experience provides evangelicalism with an air of contemporaneity, enabling the religious perspective to be more competitive in the marketplace of religious faiths (Hunter 1983).

While making some concessions, evangelicalism has also resisted many modernizing forces. In particular, evangelicals resist the deinstitutionalization of morality which began to take place after World War II. This process of deinstitutionalization undermines values such as "premarital chastity, marital fidelity,

the undesirability of divorce, and the sanctity of life" (Hunter 1983:103). Hunter argues that evangelicals' opposition to the deinstitutionalization of traditional morality is also a "political contest" with what he refers to as "the New Class" (Hunter 1983:107). The New Class are college and professionally trained individuals who "derive their livelihoods from the creation and manipulation of symbols" (Hunter 1983:107). The New Class' adherence to secular humanism and a left-liberal political ideology stand in opposition to evangelicals' support for traditional moral definitions and, as such, evangelicals view the New Class as responsible for the moral decline of America (Hunter 1983).

According to Hunter, "it is widely held in mainstream Evangelical circles that the 'wife and mother has a holy calling of God as homemaker'" and, as a result, evangelicals believe that the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution will lead to "the disintegration of the family" (Hunter 1983:104). The implication of this assertion is clear: evangelicals oppose an egalitarian conception of gender roles. Hunter, however, notes that 53% of evangelicals, as opposed to 66% of non-evangelicals, supported the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Hunter 1983). Paradoxically, these statistics, which are presented in Hunter's discussion of evangelicalism's resistance to modernizing forces, suggest an ambivalent, rather than a completely negative, response to the wider culture's general acceptance of egalitarian gender roles.

### **Promise Keepers' Ties to Evangelicalism**

Promise Keepers, originating in the United States, is consistent with American evangelical ideology. The following section will outline the development of American evangelicalism and describe the ways in which the Promise Keepers' movement is tied to evangelical ideology and organizations.

Until approximately 1870, the majority of Americans were Protestants living in rural areas. After the Civil War, the rural, Protestant character of American life began to change. Cities and industries experienced rapid growth, and "science, technology, and business were taking over where tradition, prayer, and faith had left off" (Ammerman 1987:18). Catholics and Jews were immigrating from European countries to the United States, creating a climate of religious pluralism and removing Protestantism from its hegemonic position. Furthermore, there was an intellectual revolution taking place, replacing an objective view of the world with a subjective one. For instance, the human sciences, including psychology and sociology, questioned "the nature of human responsibility, destiny, and free will" (Ammerman 1987:18).

Amidst these changes in American society, Protestant fundamentalism began to emerge. The new trends in society seemed irreconcilable with Christianity, and, therefore, fundamentalists "fought to save the historic creeds of their denominations" (Ammerman 1987:19). In 1941, fundamentalism divided into two opposing movements. Consistent with the already existing fundamentalists, the American Council of Christian Churches developed as a conservative, antimodernist voice "speaking out aggressively against compromise in religion, politics, or morality"

(Ammerman 1987:23). In opposition to the antimodernist movement of fundamentalism, the National Association of Evangelicals was formed, refusing "to separate themselves from other Christians or to adopt right-wing politics as part of their creed" (Ammerman 1987:24). The National Association of Evangelicals, in turn, led to the development of the evangelical movement, a group of conservative Protestants considered to be distinct from their fundamentalist forbearers. While both evangelicals and fundamentalists promoted a literal interpretation of biblical texts, evangelicals displayed tolerance toward many modern elements which fundamentalists resisted.<sup>10</sup> Starting with a tolerance of different doctrinal issues, evangelicals continued to display tolerance toward modern life by allowing women to take positions of leadership within the church, by attending secular educational institutions, and by supporting civil rights issues.

In The Struggle for America's Soul, sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1989) discusses the complexities of religion in the United States. Wuthnow argues that, until the end of the 1960s, there was considerable tension among religious groups in America, primarily between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Furthermore, within Protestantism, theological differences led to divisions between different denominations (Wuthnow 1989:27). However, in late twentieth century American religion, Wuthnow argues that there is a "deep cultural divide between conservative or evangelical Christians, on one side, and religious liberals and secular humanists, on the other side"

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<sup>10</sup> Ammerman states that evangelicals were tolerant of different doctrinal views which fundamentalists rejected, though she does not detail the specific doctrines that evangelicals tolerated (Ammerman 1987).

(Wuthnow 1989:17). These current tensions dividing American religion have not only created simple divisions between conflicting denominations, but have also created divisions between conservative and liberal Christians within individual denominations. Considering Wuthnow's analysis of American religion, it is problematic to define specific denominations as evangelical and others as non-evangelical, as many denominations include both evangelical and liberal Protestants.

In their analyses of Promise Keepers, Beal and Messner incorrectly label the men's movement as "fundamentalist." Fundamentalists tend to oppose the pentecostal-charismatic movements (Marsden 1991:32), yet Bill McCartney, founder of Promise Keepers, is a member of a Vineyard Church, a charismatic denomination. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Pastor James Ryle, the senior pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship which McCartney attends, was one of the speakers at the 1998 Promise Keepers conference in Detroit, Michigan. Journalist and author Ken Abraham observes that fundamentalists do not support the Promise Keepers' movement owing to its inclusivity, since Pentecostals, Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, as well as men of other faiths are permitted to attend the stadium events (Abraham 1997). Kintz also notes that Promise Keepers' ideology and practice are not consistent with the fundamentalist agenda:

...the ecumenical appeal to a generalized spirit of Christian revivalism may, in fact, make Promise Keepers more appealing to members of mainstream churches, nonreligious progressives, and charismatics than to fundamentalists themselves, many of whom have been critical of Promise Keepers because of its resemblance to secular new age pop psychology and its charismatic appeal to a very loose notion of doctrine (Kintz 1997:113).

In his analysis of American evangelicalism, Hunter describes an evangelical in the following manner:

...an Evangelical is a Protestant who attests to the inerrancy of Scripture and the divinity of Christ and either (1) believes that Jesus Christ is the only hope for salvation or (2) has had a religious experience - that is, a particularly powerful religious insight or awakening that is still important in his everyday life, that involved a conversion to Jesus Christ as his personal savior or (3) both (1) and (2) (Hunter 1985:141).

Promise Keepers' theological stance is consistent with Hunter's description of an evangelical. The following excerpts are taken from Promise Keepers' "statement of faith:"

1. We believe that there is one God eternally existing in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the Bible is God's written revelation to man and that it is verbally inspired, authoritative, and without error in the original manuscripts.
5. We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. Only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation which was made possible by His death and resurrection, can that alienation be removed (PK: 1998 Kitch. Con. 1998:4).

The first statement reflects the movement's belief in the divinity of Christ, while the second statement is evidence of Promise Keepers' adherence to the inerrancy of biblical texts. The fifth statement displays Promise Keepers' belief that faith in Christ is the only way to achieve "salvation." Not only does the men's movement's statement of faith reveal Promise Keepers' consistency with the evangelical expression of Christianity, but Promise Keepers also has many ties to evangelical organizations. For instance, among the authors of Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper are Bill Bright, founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ; Edwin Cole, founder and

president of the Christian Men's Network; Jerry Kirk, president of the National Coalition Against Pornography; and James Dobson, founder and president of Focus on the Family. These organizations are among the evangelical groups to which Promise Keepers is connected.

### **Promise Keepers and Modernity**

It should not be surprising to discover that Promise Keepers, as an evangelical movement, displays an ambivalence toward modernity consistent with Hunter's analysis. The following discussion explores the ways in which Promise Keepers reflects the three "structural dimensions of modernity."

#### **Functional Rationality**

There are many ways in which Promise Keepers presents an ideology with "rigorously standardized prescriptions." The movement itself is based upon "Seven Promises," the conception that there is a fixed set of commitments which every man needs to make. Standardized prescriptions abound throughout Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper. For example, in "Strong Mentoring Relationships," E. Glenn Wagner presents seven steps to develop a mentoring relationship:

- Step 1: Follow the Golden Rule and Be a Friend.
- Step 2: Obey the "One Another" Commands of God.
- Step 3: Seize the "Teachable Moments" in Your Life.
- Step 4: Acknowledge Your Need of Others.
- Step 5: Accept and Appreciate Differences in Others.
- Step 6: Devote Yourself to People.
- Step 7: Band Together in Small Groups for "PPP." [Prayer, Pages of scripture, Pain] (Wagner 1994:59-63).

In a similar fashion, Gary J. Oliver outlines seven steps to purity:



- Step 1: Make a decision.
- Step 2: Choose to put first things first.
- Step 3: Determine where the line is, and then stay a safe distance behind it.
- Step 4: Guard your heart.
- Step 5: Guard your mind.
- Step 6: Guard your eyes.
- Step 7: Guard the little things (Oliver 1994:85-89).

As well, as mentioned earlier, Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper provides the reader with a succinct 5-step conversion process, whereby one can be "sure" of being a Christian. These methodized components of Promise Keepers' ideology reflect evangelicalism's adoption of the modern emphasis on functional rationality.

### **Cultural Pluralism**

A "softened cultural demeanour" is not a key feature of Promise Keepers' rhetoric. For instance, at the Detroit Conference in 1998, Pastor James Ryle, before inviting non-Christians to "come to the front in the name of Jesus," told the audience that "Jesus is man's only saviour" and that men need to repent because "God will judge the world one day" (Ryle 1998). Promise Keepers, however, makes notable concessions to cultural pluralism in its emphasis upon racial reconciliation and ecumenicism. Promise Keepers' literature on racial and denominational reconciliation urges men to understand those of different ethnic and doctrinal perspectives:

The Body of Christ comprises a wide diversity of members. There are many denominations, various styles of worship, and representatives from all walks of life. Those differences frequently produce tension. People who are different from us tend to make us feel uncomfortable... We see it between the different races, who rarely mingle in worship (or anywhere else). We see it between denominations and theological persuasions. But the Bible says there is only one Body. Jesus prayed that we all might be one. As men who are Promise Keepers, we must determine to break beyond the barriers and our comfort zones and get to know other members of that Body (Janssen and Weeden 1994:155).

Promise Keepers, encouraging its members to remove barriers between racial and denominational backgrounds and refraining from endorsing one particular denomination or style of worship, relativizes evangelical denominations and worship-styles. A concession to cultural pluralism is also evident in the men's movement's practice of allowing non-evangelicals, such as Catholics and Mormons, to attend its conferences.

### **Structural Pluralism**

Promise Keepers, like the evangelical movement of which it is a part, has accommodated to the dynamics of structural pluralism. According to Abraham's analysis, the first three Promises of a Promise Keeper focus upon "individual ethics" (Abraham 1997). Indeed, in Promises One through Three a man commits himself to be devoted to Jesus Christ, to develop friendships with men who will help him keep his promises, and to practice "spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity" (Janssen and Weeden 1994:69). Promises Four through Seven, following Abraham, involve "societal ethics" (Abraham 1997). This concern for societal ethics, however, is centred around the private sphere. Promise Four requires men to commit to being better husbands and fathers, while Promise Five encourages men to give "triple honour" to their pastors and to become more active in the leadership and organization of their churches. Promise Six, encouraging men to reach "beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity" (Janssen and Weeden 1994:153), does not seem to represent a commitment to influence public policy, but rather involves the development of friendships with men from different

racism and denominations. Promise Seven represents a commitment to influence the world. Yet again, however, men are not directed to affect the public sphere by, for example, lobbying government, but are encouraged to love others and evangelize non-Christians. While the last two promises do not explicitly encourage men to influence the public sphere, some Promise Keepers may interpret these promises as a commitment to influence government policy.

### **Resistances**

Consistent with the evangelical tradition, Promise Keepers reacts against the deinstitutionalization of morality that has undermined traditional conceptions of morality, such as premarital chastity and marital fidelity. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the order-producing capacity of Promise Keepers' ideology, Wellington Boone argues that increasing amounts of "illegitimate births," teen pregnancies, and abortions contribute to a culture in "steady decline" (Boone 1994:25). Similarly, Dr. Gary Oliver believes that the acceptability of homosexual conduct and adulterous relationships are evidence of the absence of standards in society (Oliver 1994).

Individuals who describe Promise Keepers as "patriarchal" would likely point to the movement's gender ideology as a form of resistance against the wider culture's general acceptance of an egalitarian conception of the roles of men and women. However, just as Hunter's statistics on the evangelical support for the Equal Rights Amendment indicate evangelicalism's ambivalent response to changing gender roles, Promise Keepers' ideology contains a similarly ambivalent stance toward gender

egalitarianism. This ambivalence constitutes another aspect of the men's movement's uneasy relationship with modernity and will be the focus of the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **PROMISE KEEPERS AND GENDER ISSUES**

The first section of this chapter will discuss the ways in which the Promise Keepers' organization and the men who attend the stadium events view the roles of men and women. The second section of this chapter will explore the ways in which Promise-Keeping men discuss feminism.

#### ***The Ambiguity of the Cultural Construction of Gender in the Promise Keepers' Movement***

This section will undertake an analysis of Promise Keepers' gender ideology. First, I will provide an account of the ways in which gender roles are presented at a Promise Keepers' stadium event. Second, I will discuss the ways in which respondents describe the roles of men and women as essentially different. Third, I will examine three themes in the discourse of promise-keeping men concerning the roles of men and women: mutual submission, servant leadership, and the re-claiming of male authority. Fourth, I will outline the ways in which the men who attend the stadium events interpret the movement's stance toward the roles of men and women.

#### **Gender Roles at the Detroit Conference 1998**

The following excerpts are taken from a tape recording of a seminar entitled "Living a Legacy on the Homefront," presented at the Detroit Conference 1998. E.V. Hill, the speaker scheduled to give this seminar at the Detroit conference, was unable

to attend, though his name still appeared in the conference program. In place of E.V. Hill, David Castro, Director of Global Outreach Ministries, conducted the seminar. Overall, this seminar is designed to encourage Promise-Keeping men to become better husbands and fathers.

We cannot have results unless we live in divine order... God has put in His word some principles to help you be able to walk so that you can live a legacy... so that you can leave a legacy.

I would draw your attention to the first book of the Bible, Genesis... In Genesis 2:18, God says "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him." Now in some translations it says "I will make him a helpmate." In the original language that it was written in the book of Genesis, if we translate it literally, it says "I will give to him the one that corresponds to him."

And I say to you men that I have not found yet in this verse [here he is still referring to Genesis 2:18] anything that said "I am going to make [for] this man a dishwasher, one that will clean and press the clothes, one that is going to clean dirty diapers, one that is going to clean the house, to be the servant and the maid... that is not what it says." What it says is "I will make him a helpmate."

When God created woman, He gave her to man and he [man] said "This is now bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, and we are one."

[In speaking of his wife] There are things that God has put in her to complement me and there are things that God has put in me to complement her. We are one together.

One of the responsibilities of headship is knowing when to be a righteous head. Being the head, being the priest of your home, being the patriarch of your home, does not mean that you scream the loudest or give the most commands.

You are there, not to give commands, but to be under the authority of God, leading your home. That is being a righteous head. Being a head is being a vessel of peace.

David Castro's seminar presents an ambiguous notion of gender roles. On the one hand, the idea that man and woman are "one" is a concept which removes distinctions between the sexes and, as a result, connotes an element of gender equality. On the other hand, Castro's discussion of headship proposes that the man has a responsibility to occupy the role of leader in the home. In his seminar, Castro does not identify these two notions as contradictory, nor does he attempt to reconcile the discussion of "oneness" with the concept of headship.

### **Promise Keepers' Essentialism**

As mentioned earlier, Messner writes that Promise Keepers' conception of gender roles is based upon a "biblical essentialism." That is, Promise Keepers uses biblical texts to support the notion that women and men have "essentially fixed and categorically different natures" (Messner 1997:27). In the following quote, William, a 47 year old printer, describes the biological, emotional, and character differences between men and women:

There are differences... I can't bear a baby. I can't nurse a child... she's very gentle, I can sometimes be rough. As far as other stuff... sure there are differences. Emotionally, she can cry at the drop of a hat when she watches tear-jerkers on T.V.. I sit there and laugh at her because I think that it is silly... I don't know how much more I can say as far as the differences between a man and a woman, but there's a lot of them.

Greg believes that men and women are confronted with different issues:

I like the fact that there is something out there just for guys because our issues are different. You can't deny it, though some would like to.

Not only are men and women essentially different, according to those who attend the evangelical men's conferences, but men require male-only events to approach and resolve their exclusively masculine issues. William notes the following:

I think that these fellowships are great for men because I think that they feel more open and don't feel as threatened. Some women are blabber mouths and so I wouldn't give them the time of day because they would run around and tell everybody.

Allan, a 32 year old technical writer, remarks:

Promise Keepers seems to be getting men to spill their guts and it would probably only work if you knew that there were just men around. I don't know why. I guess men are just sort of wired that way.

While Messner asserts that Promise Keepers' essentialism is biblically-based, these respondents adhere to an essentialism without reference to biblical texts. Moreover, these men present the differences between the sexes as if they are self-evident and without need of proof.

Although there appears to be a general acceptance of the essential differences between men and women among those who attend Promise Keepers events, some participants in the movement disagree with Promise Keepers' presentation of the differences between men and women. For example, Stuart, a 33 year old missionary, commented:

When I first heard of Promise Keepers coming on to the scene, I was resistant to the notion that there should be a thing for men. Just as I would have been if there had of been a Promise Keepers group for women. I have been resistant to that notion because, and as I have subsequently discovered, there is a lot in the Promise Keepers of accentuating the maleness of men and how much men are different from women and how great it is to get together with other men because we really understand each other. In fact, at the first Promise Keepers convention I went to there was a discussion of how this male friend of one of the speakers was able to understand him better than even his own wife was



able to understand him. I consider that to be a strange notion. I think that I have male friends who understand me in a different way, but I don't think that anybody understands me better than my own wife. Basically, it [Promise Keepers] segregates men and women and I don't think that that is a good thing.

Stuart's rejection of Promise Keepers' essentialism is, however, an exception to respondents' general acceptance of the fundamental differences between the sexes.

Even though the theme of essentialism pervades Promise Keepers' gender ideology, many Promise Keepers believe that men need to adopt qualities which are normally associated with femininity. In the following excerpt, Colin, a 59 year old custodial supervisor, recognizes a woman's ability to display emotion and affection toward other women and criticizes the emotionally restrained male:

In society today, we don't have any involvement between men. In that men do not hug each other, do not embrace one another, yet I can see two women doing it and I've seen two women allowing themselves to be emotional. Men will not allow themselves to be emotional with other men.

Dan, a 46 year old missionary, refers to his experience at a conference event where he was able to express his emotions in the company of other men.

I just found a real release. A sense of the new-found freedom that I can really express emotions without feeling like I've betrayed my manhood or anything like that.

Women, according to John, a 47 year old store owner, are able to share personal experiences with one another and have been doing so for years, whereas men are not inclined to speak to one another about personal matters.

I think that there is that hunger... I think that there is that thirst for meeting together as men. We've always known that women always seem to gravitate to each other and it always seemed much easier for women to come together in that kind of a setting than men. But, I think that Promise Keepers has shown that men need each other just like women need women. And, we need to relate to each other in a spiritual setting... in a wholesome way and open our

lives up to each other. I think that for too long we [men] have convinced ourselves that we don't need anybody else... that we're islands unto ourselves and we close ourselves off.

Similarly, Cam, a 46 year old clinical psychologist, explains:

Men are fairly brain dead and we are finally finding out what women knew a long time ago. I mean, they have obviously beat us to the punch because they have been talking about these issues for years... They have been getting together in small groups and large groups for years and men are finally getting to the point where we don't have to play sports or go to something together that we would actually risk talking to each other about my frailties... about my failures... about the emptiness in my life... about the standards that I ascribe to and fail to live up to. And, it has been something that we have seen women, by and large, do years ago.

When asked to account for a man's inability to discuss "frailties and failures" with other men, Cam replied:

Pride and probably psychologically... I don't think that men are as psychologically healthy as women are. By and large, women recognize their need for... and I know that I am speaking of generalities... counselling centres are filled with women who say "I am in trouble... I need help." You'll see a man come into a counselling centre, but you'll see the rug marks of his heels all the way down the hallway and he'll say "My wife told me... she said I had to... its either this or the highway." I think that men have maintained this somewhat archaic, as I think of it now, facade of being in control and the need to portray that I am strong... I am stable... I am the one who can go out and slay the beast. I think that somehow we have allowed ourselves to be cornered into that kind of a role.

The above-quoted Promise Keepers believe that men should adopt social qualities which are, according to these men, associated with femininity: open displays of emotion and affection to members of the same sex, the ability to share personal experiences with a person of the same sex, and the ability to ask for help when needed. Not only does the assertion that men should adopt feminine characteristics implicitly valorize femininity, but this claim also suggests that there are some social

qualities which transcend gender. The recognition that such qualities exist provides another exception to Promise Keepers' adherence to the essential differences between men and women.

Promise Keepers' biblical essentialism, according to Messner, implies "that there are natural, biological reasons for women and men to occupy different social positions" (Messner 1997:27). Whereas women are suited for the nurturing of children, men are well-suited "to be captains of industry or workers in the paid labour force" (Messner 1997:27). These notions have resulted in a "gendered public-domestic split" (Messner 1997:27). In contrast to Messner's analysis, several respondents reject a gender-based division of labour in the domestic and occupational worlds. In the following excerpts, William and John discuss, in turn, the domestic responsibilities which they assume:

I mean, this is not a bragging thing, but there are certain things that [my wife] does... and I will go and do the wash. I'll do the laundry. I'll fold it. I'll even iron. I'll get down on my hands and knees and wash the floor... clean the bathrooms. I mean, she does the cooking, so why wouldn't I do those other things?

There is a high level of thinking, unfortunately, where the male comes home from a hard day at work and spends the rest of the evening watching T.V. or doing something he wants, as opposed to spending time with the kids or helping with cleaning responsibilities at home. I think that Promise Keepers has challenged the balanced approach... the blended approach... encouraging men to be a part of the family and not expecting the women to do everything.

Moreover, John states that contemporary economic realities require both husbands and wives to work outside of the home and share domestic duties.

We have to realize that in today's society where two incomes are very important and so often a necessity, you have wives and mothers who are giving themselves to full-time jobs and coming home and having to fulfil roles as a

mother and a wife. Yet, so often men come home saying "Well, you don't know what kind of a day I had." But, their wives are also experiencing a lot of pressures and demands on their lives and they have to come home and perform. Its been an important thing for me to make sure that I am a part of my wife's life in such a way that I am coming home and being supportive of everything that she does, whether it be cleaning or other things... I should take on responsibilities at home.

Darren, a 41 year old who works in the Canadian Promise Keepers' office, does not support gender-based divisions of labour in the domestic or occupational spheres.

One of the fellows in my theology class, his wife is working outside of the home and he stays at home and looks after the three kids and I have no problem calling him an exemplary Promise Keeper. At this particular point in time it is more advantageous to their family because his wife earns a higher income... for her to work... for him to go to school and look after the kids.

In the following passage, Darren also rejects the traditional familial form:

I am very wary when we get into the traditional role thing because then we get into traditional culture that is not necessarily biblical.... There are some men who will attend the conferences and who will want to live their life according to the traditional roles. And when we talk about traditional, we go back to the turn of this century where the woman would stay at home and the man would go out and work. All we need to do is go back another fifty or seventy years to find out that that is not what we call traditional today. Generally, it was agrarian, both partners worked their keesters off. So, I think that is one of the cultural issues that we have to let go of and it's not our idea to promote that.

Owing to current economic realities and a recognition that the conception of the traditional family with a "stay-at-home mom" is not necessarily a biblical precept, these Promise-Keeping men have embraced domestic duties and supported their wives' participation in the labour market.

### **"Mutual Submission:" Embracing Egalitarianism**

Many Promise-Keeping men seem to embrace an egalitarian conception of the marriage relationship. William expresses his views on the equality of men and women in the following passage:

One time we saw this program where this woman was on television claiming that we [Promise Keepers] were going to put women under subjection. My girls both looked at me and said "That's not you dad... you're always there for us... you're always telling us to do our best. You're not the kind of guy who says that if you're going to be a woman, you're going to have to..." I don't know if you've heard the expression "I'd rather be born a horse than a woman." I mean, I don't believe that garbage. When God created us, he created us as equals. I think that the best terminology that I heard was that He didn't take a bone out of his head so that they were above us. He didn't take a bone out of his foot so that they were below us. He took a bone out of his side so that they could be beside us.

William's wife seems to have considerable influence over his plans, as he consults with her before attending a Promise Keepers' gathering.

I work at the head office of my church's denomination and a friend of mine, the director of men's ministries for the denomination, said "You might be interested in this," and he passed me this piece of paper with the first meeting that they [Promise Keepers] were having here and they were interested in having the event in Springfield. So, I asked my wife and said "Well, what do you think?" She said "You have a place to stay for one night... you can go there Friday night and then come home on Saturday."

In the following passage, Allan refers to himself as an "egalitarian:"

I would be an egalitarian if that's a term that makes any sense. I believe that a man and wife are, together, responsible for their home and their children and that, as much as possible, in fact, all of the time, I think that it is important for men and women to compromise and come to a decision together. I think that you can't do that all of the time... its unrealistic. I think that sometimes my wife and I decide... maybe I'm more persuasive. Maybe not. I don't know. But, sometimes we'll decide to do it my way and not her way. Other times, we'll decide to do it her way and not my way when we disagree. I don't have any problem with that. That is the way it should be. Sometimes my way... sometimes your way... sometimes we both have the same way. I think that the

Bible does say that wives should submit to their husbands. However, it also says that husbands should submit to their wives. So, I would say *that its the half truth that's being shared*. The leadership role of the man is true, but there's also the leadership role of the woman.

The concept of mutual submission is echoed by William and Randy:

We [my wife and I] complement each other... we encourage each other... we *are submissive to each other*. The Bible says to submit yourself one to another.

It's controversial, but we are to *submit one to another*. Man to woman. Its 100% to 100% and, as one speaker put it, a man should be working 110% to the woman's 100% to make the marriage work. He should treat her as Christ would treat her, to lead her as Christ would lead her.

The idea of "mutual submission" is based upon a biblical passage found in the letter to the Ephesians (5:22-25). In these verses, wives are told to "submit" to their husbands and husbands are commanded to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). To those who embrace the concept of mutual submission, the commandment directed to husbands is *interpreted as an order for men to submit to their wives*. This interpretation of the husband's role is *buttressed by the verse which appears directly before the instruction to husbands and wives: "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21)*.

### **"Servant Leadership:" An Ambiguous Gender Ideology**

Many respondents possess an ambiguous gender ideology, simultaneously promoting a patriarchal and egalitarian discussion of the roles of men and women.

This ambiguity is evident in the following excerpts from an interview with Dan:

I think that Promise Keepers is a call back to those observable, knowable, communicable laws that God has ordained through every generation for human beings to follow. Promise Keepers is laying that responsibility on men to be men... to lead and lead carefully, cautiously, convincingly, conscientiously, and caringly...

Quit being the guy who is always looking to be served. Become servants to your families... to your wives and literally, if it comes down to it, love them so sacrificially that you are willing to say "no" to every desire that you have in order to serve them...

Don't become the head of something in order to be served and to have all of the power and the congratulations that goes along with it. No, you need to die to those things. Your headship will be proved in your service... your servant heart. That's the message.

On one hand, Dan adheres to the notion that men need to fulfil their divinely-ordained role as "head of the household." On the other hand, he claims that the "head of the household" exercises his role through service and sacrifice. Practically, the head of the household must, at times, sacrifice plans and ambitions for the sake of other household members. Dan explains the sacrificial role of the head of the household in the following passage:

I'd love to be able to say that my wife and I are totally in sync and that we share the same values. We share some of the same values, but we often have different points of view and it's those different points of view that make us see things differently. We wonder whether or not we have the same values and I find that when my values become *more* important than her values, she doesn't find encouragement in that... she finds discouragement. And so I really need to look at what has caused that discouragement and ask "Am I willing to release my plans, my ambitions, and the things that are important to me, in order to be an encouragement to her?"

The concept of "servant leadership" is based upon two biblical passages: the directions to husbands and wives found in Ephesians 5:23 and Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28. The verse from the letter to the Ephesians describes the husband as "the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" and, therefore, presents the husband with a leadership role within the marital relationship. While many Promise Keepers believe that men should occupy this position of

leadership, the meaning of the concept of "leadership" has been re-defined. Darren describes Promise Keepers' definition of leadership in the following excerpt:

Without sounding too idealistic, one of the big reasons why there is a negative vision [toward Promise Keepers by feminist groups] is that words are just containers of meaning and if... lets say someone from the feminist agenda talks about leadership and we talk about leadership, it could mean radically different things and so when we say to men that you need to take the leadership in your home, the one that we are using is the Jesus model... the Last Supper where Jesus washes the disciples' feet... the one where he laid down His life for her. We are saying, in a nutshell, that first off the roles are different, not subservient one or the other... that the woman's role is entirely different.

Similarly, Jack, a 35 year old manager of production, re-defines leadership in the following passage:

When I go, [my wife] knows that I am getting that much more of an understanding on how to be the leader in my family. Not the controller, but the leader. I think that is one of the misperceptions that society has is the control issue, that men are learning how to control their wives and to control their families.

These Promise-Keeping men base their definition of leadership upon the theme of servanthood, exemplified in the following passage from the Book of Matthew:

Jesus called them [the disciples] together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).

In light of the theme of servanthood, Promise Keepers remove authoritarian principles from the concept of leadership and, instead, associate the concept with serving others.

### **Re-Claiming Male Authority**

When writing about Promise Keepers' gender ideology, many academics and journalists refer to Tony Evans' chapter entitled "Spiritual Purity" from Seven Promises



of a Promise Keeper. The following excerpts from this chapter are frequently quoted in writings on Promise Keepers:

I am convinced that the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization of the American male. When I say feminization, I am not talking about sexual preference. I'm trying to describe a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of "sissified" men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum.

I can hear you saying, "I want to be a spiritually pure man. Where do I start?" The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: "Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role." Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back...

If you're going to lead, you must lead. Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently and lovingly. But lead! (Evans 1994:79-80).

This explicitly patriarchal perspective urging men to re-claim their divinely-sanctioned position of leadership within the familial structure rarely occurs in respondents' views and seems muted in the organization as a whole. Kyle, one of the few respondents who held an explicitly patriarchal perspective, commented:

I see [the role of women] as one of support and encouragement. What [women] need to do is to be praying and to look for the changes... to encourage and to back-off and to allow the man... especially if they have assumed the role of spiritual leader in the household... let him assume the position... look for subtle changes, encourage and say "I really appreciate the effort that you are putting forth for our family to have devotions" and try to re-arrange the schedule to enable him to be successful in that. They have to back-off... to give and take... and just keep praying.

Those who support the notion of "re-claiming male authority" likely base their patriarchal view of gender roles on Ephesians 5:23. It is somewhat ironic that the same biblical passage supports both patriarchal and egalitarian perspectives. Whereas those Promise Keepers who support the concepts of mutual submission and servant

leadership remove and soften the patriarchal overtones of biblical passages, those who support the re-claiming of male authority interpret the text from Ephesians in a literal manner.

### **Promise Keepers' Gender Ideology: The Respondent's Perspective**

Respondents do not share a uniform view of Promise Keepers' stance toward the roles of men and women. Some respondents interpret the men's movement's gender ideology as patriarchal while others claim that a patriarchal reading of the movement's ideology is misinformed. In the following excerpt, Mark, a 71 year old retired communications Specialist, describes the way in which a man could interpret Promise Keepers' ideology as patriarchal:

No matter what the intention of the teacher, it's really easy for something to be twisted, and distorted and used in part for whatever. These are usual problems in communications. So, I believe that it is possible for some guys to come out of Promise Keepers and go home and do the opposite to what we proclaim. Many wives have been thrilled when their husbands have come back from Promise Keepers and have said "He's a new man... he has a new attitude... a new relationship with his wife... he is a changed person." I believe that it is possible for some guys to come back and say "I am boss." He hasn't heard the message... he has heard what he wants to hear.

Similarly, Greg explains:

You are also going to have guys that go to these conferences and misinterpret what they are trying to say. You know, they'll try and warp it into their own little view. You're not going to stop that... Like if he said "Men are the head of the household." Well, that means that I get to go home and tell my wife what to do and make all of the decisions and all of that kind of stuff. Well, I'm sorry, but you didn't listen to the rest of the conversation. As far as scripture goes, that doesn't mean that you have authority over your wife, that means that you have to love her as Christ loved you... as Christ has authority over you.

Those who interpret Promise Keepers' ideology as a reassertion of male authority have, according to these respondents, misinterpreted the movement's message. These respondents do not consider, however, the possibility that some men who attend a conference may interpret Promise Keepers' agenda as patriarchal yet adhere to an egalitarian conception of gender roles. In the following interview excerpt, Allan identifies Promise Keepers' agenda as patriarchal and displays his objection to this patriarchal gender ideology:

The whole men taking back their role as spiritual leader in the family... I'm still not sure that I understand all of that. I can understand, to a certain extent, what they [Promise Keepers] are saying and they do refer to scriptures to get their information. I guess it bothers me because... my wife... we have a mutual responsibility for our spiritual well-being and what we do in our house...

This lack of consensus surrounding Promise Keepers' depiction of the roles of men and women, as expressed by those who attend the conferences, suggests that the men's movement presents an ambiguous or inconsistent gender ideology, one that can be viewed as egalitarian by some and patriarchal by others.

### **Promise-Keeping Men and Feminism**

As mentioned above, feminism is rarely discussed in Promise Keepers' literature. Based on fieldwork interviews, this section explores the views of Promise-Keeping men toward feminism.<sup>11</sup> Many men who have attended a Promise Keepers event have encountered protestors from the (U.S.) National Organization for Women

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<sup>11</sup>I use the term "feminism" to refer to a political movement which believes "that women are subordinated and that it is necessary to develop strategies to liberate them" (Abbott and Wallace 1990:xii).

or other groups which champion women's rights. Respondents in my study had a tendency to refer to those who challenge Promise Keepers' gender ideology as "feminists" or as "the women's rights movement." A few respondents made reference to the actual name of the person or organization issuing the challenge, while one respondent incorrectly labelled a women's rights group as a "lesbian" group. During the informal interviews, some respondents described their encounters with these "feminists." In the following excerpt, Randy recalls his experience with feminist protestors at the "Stand in the Gap Sacred Assembly," held in the National Mall, Washington D.C.:

At one end there is this main street coming into the concourse area and on one side was the feminist placard-wavers protesting and there were about two dozen of them and thousands of men are coming past them and they are waving and shouting... protesting. On the other side of the street, exactly opposite, was another group of placard wavers. Five or six hundred women encouraging their men to go and they were far louder than the one group of course, and they were singing, singing songs and cheering as the men went by and they were encouraging Promise Keepers to do the job that was needing to be done. It was good.

Greg describes his encounter with a women's rights group at a Promise Keepers stadium event.

The first year I was down in Detroit we went outside for lunch and there was an airplane up in the sky and it had a big banner out the end of it and it said "Men do not own women and children." There were seventy-two thousand people watching this airplane flying around the dome and it was a women's rights movement which had gone to the financial expense and labour to communicate something which was so far from the mark. When we got inside, the M.C. of the whole programme, he got-up and said "Did everybody see that plane up there?" There was a lot of groaning. He said "Isn't it great that men don't own women and children." And the whole place just went up in applause. It was so loud that you just couldn't even hear... because it was just so far from what they are trying to communicate.

By labelling the protestors as "feminists" and by associating the banner-pulling plane with the women's rights movement, the above-quoted men associate those who oppose Promise Keepers with feminists and members of the women's rights movement. According to Greg, feminist opposition to the men's movement is based upon ill-informed opinions:

Well, you learn scripturally and from these conferences... you are to treat your wife and family as Christ treats you. In other words, you've got to be forgiving. Treat them with respect. Their opinion counts. All these things. You can't just run around and make all of the decisions for your family. That's not what it's about. The Bible is so misinterpreted with regards to husbands and wives and just relationships in general with men and women. And it's so misquoted and misinterpreted, they take one line and don't look at the entire context of the verse, what it was talking about in that chapter, or whatever. And they say that all God wants is to keep women down. Just ignorant comments. It just frustrates you and you just get so angry. They are calling us "close minded" and I think close minded? Look at the whole scripture, investigate it. Look at the impact that these guys are having on their families. Look at what the wives are saying about them. They are saying "This is wonderful, he helps me now with the laundry, he's around the house a lot, he's cut back at work a lot to spend more time at home."

Thus, Greg suggests that feminist opposition to Promise Keepers is based upon an inaccurate portrayal of the men's movement. In his view, if provided with an accurate depiction of the men's movement, feminists would cease to be antagonistic. Indeed, Greg describes the experience of a lesbian who, after attending a conference, developed a more favourable opinion of Promise Keepers.

I think that I read in one of these magazines... [here he pointed to an issue of New Man] They have letters to the editor and a woman wrote in, who was a lesbian, and said "I dressed-up as a guy and went into one of these conferences." And she said "It's changed my attitude toward Promise Keepers. There's no funny business going on in there. Although I don't agree necessarily with God and scripture and all of that kind of stuff, they are not there to put women down." And I thought, "Finally, thank-you very much, a refreshing approach to find out for yourself before blabbing off about what it is and what

it does." Even though you may disagree with her, you've got to respect her. She actually took it into her own hands and checked it out. At least it was an informed article, rather than rhetoric. That's what I appreciate.

Although respondents label women who oppose Promise Keepers as feminists, many Promise-Keeping men seem to embrace aspects of the feminist movement. Greg differentiates between "true feminists" and "radical or ultra feminist" groups, suggesting that there are forms of feminism which are consistent with the Promise Keepers' agenda:

I think that the feminists... the ultra-feminist groups, not the true feminist groups, but the ultra-feminist groups... the radical feminist groups and a few others were caught off guard and thought "men's conference... can't do that."

There are other ways in which Promise Keepers present an ideology consistent with aspects of feminism. The embracing of egalitarianism and the rejection of gender-based divisions of labour in the occupational and domestic worlds are evidence of an acceptance of feminist thought among Promise Keepers. The re-definition of leadership as "service" also displays a softening of patriarchy and a sensitivity to the feminist agenda. Furthermore, as Darren expresses it, men have some responsibility for the women's movement:

I think that when push comes to shove and you back a guy up against a corner, no matter what his values are, he'll admit that, to a certain extent, men do feel responsible for the women's movement, for the way women were treated.

Some Promise-Keeping men suggest that the men's movement itself mediates the contradiction between patriarchy and feminism. Cam attempts to display the compatibility between Promise Keepers and the feminist movements, claiming that the evangelical movement is the answer to feminism.

I think that Promise Keepers scares the feminists because what they cry out for is something that scares them to death. What holds their movement together is the victimization and yet when one says that I freely acknowledge that I have not treated you right and that we are here to love you, we are here to serve you, we are here to honour you, we are here to lift you up, I think that very message is what they cry out for and what scares them to death... So I do think that there is a... National Organization of Women, I think that there is a women's group whose heart has been hurt, rightfully so, and I think that they are scared to death that if Promise Keepers says what they live up to, it would be the end of many feminist movements.

Following this respondent, if all men lived their lives in accordance with the Seven Promises, many feminist movements would no longer need to exist. The Promise Keepers movement is, according to this respondent, the fulfilment of the feminist agenda.

### **Evangelicalism and Feminism**

Given the acceptance of feminist thought within some factions of the wider, evangelical movement, Promise Keepers' sensitivity to the feminist agenda is not surprising. William Watkins, an evangelical author, notes that feminism has "sensitized" his behaviour (Watkins 1996). Furthermore, Watkins states that he has "an abiding respect" for the First Wave feminists who were active during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These feminists fought "for the abolition of slavery, the right to vote, improvements in the conditions of the working class, child labour laws, opening doors to more educational opportunities for women, and many other social issues" (Watkins 1996:152). Michael Maudlin, the managing editor of the evangelical magazine entitled Christianity Today, argues that Christianity needs feminism because it "makes us confront uncomfortable truths" and "looks at our

assumptions about work, about parenting, about marriage, about church, about women and men, and simply asks, is this fair?" (Maudlin 1997:37).

Mardi Keyes, an evangelical lecturer and co-director of the L'Abri Fellowship retreat centre in Massachusetts, argues that "men and women were created equal in the image of God and that God said that was very good (Gen 1:31)" (Keyes 1995:5). Keyes argues that patriarchy was never divinely sanctioned, but developed as a result of "human rebellion (sin) against the Creator" (Keyes 1995:7). Furthermore, Keyes notes that Jesus challenged patriarchy: "rejecting the practice of keeping women separate and silent, Jesus included them in his travelling band of disciples" (Keyes 1995:9). The apostle Paul advocates a marriage relationship based upon "mutual submission of servant-leadership, the wife submitting to a husband who was to model Christ by loving her enough to die for her, and mutual authority, husbands and wives having the same authority over their own and each other's bodies" (Keyes 1995:12). Similarly, Bishop T.D. Jakes, an evangelical author and pastor, argues that "while 1 Corinthians 11:3 designates the man as the head, it does not refer to him as a dictator" (Jakes 1997:45). In addressing male readers, Jakes states that "We must allow our female counterparts to stand shoulder to shoulder with us" (Jakes 1997:45). Keyes recognizes that there are two passages from Paul's letters which seem to deny women the opportunity to teach and be authorities in the church. Regarding these two passages, Keyes states that "It is a serious mistake to use them to exclude women from leadership when so much clear New Testament evidence points to the opposite conclusion" (Keyes 1995:13).



**Promise Keepers and Feminism: A Summary**

Many Promise Keepers have been confronted with protestors from the National Organization for Women or other feminist groups who picket outside the men's movement's events. There is a tendency for Promise-Keeping men to view feminist opposition as ill-informed, based upon an inaccurate portrayal of the men's movement. According to these men, if feminist protestors were provided with a correct depiction of Promise Keepers, they would cease to be antagonistic. The men's belief in the compatibility between Promise Keepers' evangelical perspective and the feminist agenda is not entirely unexpected, given the presence of a sensitivity to feminist issues in some branches of the wider, evangelical movement.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **THE PROCESS OF EXPANDING MARKET SHARE**

The modern forces of secularization and pluralism, according to Berger, are dialectically related: "It is just as possible to say that pluralism produces secularization as it is to say that secularization produces pluralism" (Berger 1967:155). The concept of secularization refers to "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (Berger 1967:107). The forces of secularization undo the monopoly of the religious establishment, resulting in a situation in which religious institutions no longer provide "the ultimate legitimation" for "individual and collective life" (Berger 1967:135). A pluralistic society is one in which groups with differing reality-defining ideologies compete with one another for a share of the market. Demonopolized religious institutions "can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client populations" and, as a result, the previously-imposed religious tradition must be marketed "to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy'" (Berger 1967:138). In the "market situation," following Berger, "religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities" (Berger 1967:138). The religious group competes with other reality-defining groups to attract consumers. Competing groups may not necessarily be religious ones, but may take the form of secular reality-defining movements. While there is likely to be a strong degree of "product loyalty" toward traditional religious definitions of reality among "old consumers," a religious

group must take the wishes of new or potential consumers into account when attempting to market its commodity (Berger 1967:145). By considering the consumers' wishes, the religious group adopts consumer controls over its product and its product can be changed according to what is perceived as being fashionable (Berger 1967).

A "plausibility structure" is the "social base" which enables a socially constructed world to remain real to individuals (Berger 1967:45). In the pluralistic situation, the demonopolized religion suffers from the problem of maintaining its plausibility structure. That is, in a situation characterized by competing religious and secular reality-defining groups, individuals are faced with "disconfirming others," people who are members of competing groups and who adhere to differing religious ideologies. In the following passage, Berger describes the importance of the plausibility structure for the maintenance of the Christian worldview:

The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them. When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter, and its reality ceases to impose itself as self-evident truth (Berger 1967:46).

A plausibility structure that "loses its intactness" has to develop "world-maintaining legitimations" (Berger 1967:47). The term "legitimation" refers to "socially objectivated 'knowledge' that serves to explain and justify the social order" (Berger 1967:30).

Both the United States and Canada are typified by a competitive marketplace of reality-defining institutions. Religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church and Campus Crusade for Christ, and secular groups, like the National Organization for

Women, compete with one another for their share of consumers, individuals in search of a framework with which to understand the world as "real." The Promise Keepers organization competes in the market situation of the two nations, attempting to attract male consumers to a particular definition of reality. Promise Keepers uses a variety of marketing strategies to sell its commodity -- a religious order based upon evangelical ideology -- to potential consumers. The use of sport imagery and metaphors in Promise Keepers' literature, the hosting of conference events in football stadiums and hockey arenas, and the employment of ex-sports heroes as conference speakers serve to make the evangelical message more attractive to male consumers. Promise Keepers' "resources," sold at the stadium events and by mail-order catalogue, contain a variety of masculine items boasting the Promise Keepers' logo: silk ties, stainless-steel commuter mugs, golf shirts, and baseball caps. The presence of these "male" products within Promise Keepers' paraphernalia is evidence of the men's movement's attempt to market its organization to male consumers.

In Risk Society, Ulrich Beck (1992) attempts to conceptualize the changes that are occurring in late twentieth century society. Beck argues that society is in a process of transformation from a state of "simple modernity" to a state which he refers to as "reflexive modernity." In simple modernity, society is generally characterized by industrialism, technological development, and rational thought. In reflexive modernity, there is "not less but more modernity, a modernity radicalized against the paths and categories of the classical industrial setting" (Beck 1992:14). That is, in reflexive modernity the institutional foundations of simple modernity become revised and

transformed as individuals become sceptical of technological and scientific developments. Beck argues that the reflexive modernization of social life results in a risk society in which individuals attempt to deal with the "hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (Beck 1992:21).

Promise Keepers attempts to capitalize on the insecurities which individuals experience in contemporary society. While Beck's discussion of "risk" is principally concerned with the effects of industrial hazards, such as pollution, on humans and ecology, Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper paints a portrait of contemporary societal hazards: violent crimes, illegitimate births, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, absentee fathers, and the disintegration of the family. Promise Keepers markets its religious order as the solution to these societal hazards. The recurring discussions of societal hazards throughout Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper function to heighten the individual's sense of risk, making the individual aware of his need for Promise Keepers' commodity; a religious order which helps a man cope with the real or imagined uncertainties of contemporary society.

There are currents within Promise Keepers' ideology which enable the men's organization to penetrate different, often oppositional areas of the reality-defining market. Promise Keepers' *emphasis* upon denominational reconciliation enables the men's movement to attract non-evangelical consumers: Catholics, Mormons, and liberal Protestants. The focus upon racial reconciliation encourages consumers separated by racial tensions to put aside their differences and to unite as fellow Promise Keepers. The emphasis upon racial reconciliation may also appeal to

consumers who support the wider culture's general acceptance of racial diversity. As well, Promise Keepers' ambiguous gender ideology enables the men's movement to penetrate seemingly oppositional areas of the market. On the one hand, consumers in search of a patriarchal gender ideology will be attracted by Promise Keepers' discussion of the need for male leadership. On the other hand, consumers who adhere to an egalitarian conception of the roles of men and women can structure their marital roles according to the principle of mutual submission. Moreover, men who adopt the ambiguous conception of servant leadership can participate in Promise Keepers without having to decide in favour of either a patriarchal or egalitarian gender ideology.

In "Society as Symbolic Interaction," sociologist Herbert Blumer reacts against the view that describes social action as the product of structure or organization. Instead, society is to be understood, according to Blumer, "in terms of the acting units that form it" (Blumer 1969:85). Humans do not merely respond to stimulus, but engage in a process of interpretation of the actions of others. The starting point for Blumer's symbolic interactionist perspective is Mead's discussion of the self. Through the self, Mead describes humans as capable of being the object of their own actions. Human action is constructed, not released, as "the individual proceeds by pointing out to himself the divergent things which have to be taken into account in the course of his action" (Blumer 1969:81). Action is created through a process of self-indication, "a moving communicative process in which the individual notes things, assesses them, gives them a meaning, and decides to act on the basis of the meaning" (Blumer 1969:81). This process of self-indication takes place within a social context (Blumer

1969:81). Group action "consists of the aligning of individual actions," the individual aligning his own actions by ascertaining "the intention or direction of the acts of others" (Blumer 1969:82).

The men who attend Promise Keepers events are engaged in a process of self-indication. For instance, John has assessed his circumstances and has realized that, due to current economic realities, he and his wife must both work outside the home and share domestic duties. As they have negotiated the meaning of gender roles, many Promise-Keeping men have probably been influenced by the wider culture's general acceptance of gender equality. For Promise-Keeping men, however, the process of self-indication takes place within the boundaries of the evangelical worldview, a religious framework which views biblical texts as inerrant. Therefore, the meanings which are constructed and the actions which are taken by Promise-Keeping men must have a biblical basis. Placed within the boundaries of evangelicalism, those who support the wider culture's general acceptance of gender equality have developed the concept of mutual submission, an egalitarian perspective on gender roles based on biblical texts. Through the concept of "servant leadership," Promise-Keeping men remove authoritarian principles from the role of a leader and, instead, associate leadership with attending to the needs of others. The ambiguous character of the concept of "servant leadership" results from the attempt to reconcile notions of gender equality with a religious framework which holds that a man has a responsibility to occupy the divinely-ordained role of leader in the home.

Following Blumer's conceptualization of group action as "the aligning of individual actions" (Blumer 1969:82), the ambiguous discussion of gender within the Promise Keepers' movement is a reflection of the individual men who attend the organization's events. When organizing a stadium event, the leadership of Promise Keepers must consider the views of, not only those who adopt a patriarchal perspective, but also those who promote gender equality and the ambiguous concept of servant leadership. If the movement were to adopt one particular view of gender roles, Promise Keepers would reduce its potential share of the market, as those who were alienated from this particular perspective on gender would not attend the men's movement's events.

The U.S. National Organization for Women (NOW), an organization which depicts itself as an advocate for women's rights, appears to offer the most visible competition to the reality-defining agenda of the Promise Keepers. NOW's website posts its own reading of Promise Keepers, attempting to expose the supposedly hidden misogynist political agenda of the movement. The website also provides information about ways in which individuals can display opposition to Promise Keepers by writing letters, signing petitions, and attending protests. To Promise Keepers, NOW fulfils the role of the "disconfirming other." NOW's opposition to Promise Keepers is portrayed in Time magazine (Stodghill 1997), where a photo is featured of a protestor at the Stand in the Gap Sacred Assembly holding a placard which bears the acronym "NOW." Given the extent of NOW's opposition to Promise Keepers, it is likely that, when discussing feminist opposition to the men's movement, Promise-Keeping men are



referring at least in part to NOW's agenda. Promise-Keeping men confront the competing reality defined by NOW by appropriating elements of an egalitarian gender ideology and by attempting to discredit feminist analyses of Promise Keepers, claiming that feminist depictions of the evangelical men's movement are biased and the product of poor research. Cam's belief that Promise Keepers is the answer to feminism seems to exemplify the men's movement's attempt to quell feminist competition, by appropriating feminist discourse in an effort to dispel opposition and expand the men's movement's share of the reality-defining market.

The American faction of Promise Keepers appears to be in the process of expanding its market share by targeting female consumers. As previously noted, both women and men have been issued an invitation to the Promise Keepers "assemblies" planned for January 1st 2000. Furthermore, the American chapter of Promise Keepers has, in cooperation with Chapel Ministries, developed a church curriculum entitled "Promises Worth Keeping." Throughout the fifty days of the curriculum, congregation members use a daily study guide to help them make eight promises. When compared to the men's movement's "seven promises," these eight promises contain similar themes:

1. Nurture a growing intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ.
  2. Cultivate vital friendships that encourage you to keep your promises.
  3. Practice purity in thought and action.
  4. Make family relationships a priority.
  5. Support the ministry of your church and pastor.
  6. Identify and address the hidden prejudices of your heart.
  7. Influence your world with the love of Christ.
  8. Live one day at a time through the power of the risen Christ
- (Promises Worth Keeping 1998).

The pastor of the congregation also follows the curriculum, focussing his Sunday sermon on one of the eight promises that constitutes the week's theme. The brochure describing the church curriculum boasts that women can now experience the "joy" of Promise Keepers:

Pastor, if you thought the life-changing power of Promise Keepers was limited to a football stadium full of men... think again! The new "PK" 50-Day Spiritual Adventure delivers accelerated spiritual growth to your entire congregation... All the men, women, students, and children in your church can experience the joy of learning how to live what they say they believe (Promises Worth Keeping 1998).

The cover design of the brochure describing this church curriculum seems to indicate the organization's change of focus. Whereas on the cover of Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper three distinctly masculine figures are shown holding up a globe, the subsequently published brochure portrays a multi-racial group of men, women, and children working together to sign their names to a statement of commitment which bears the words "no more broken promises." It is interesting to note that behind this group of people one can discern the outline of a stadium filled to capacity. Perhaps this brochure foreshadows the transformation of the American men's movement into an organization which welcomes women to attend and participate fully in its conferences. While attempting to increase its market share by attracting female consumers, Promise Keepers' inclusion of women may not be a welcomed change among some Promise-Keeping men, as many of these men believe that they require a male-only space to confront and address life's problems.

In an interview with a leader of the Canadian chapter of Promise Keepers, I asked about the "Promises Worth Keeping" church curriculum and whether or not the

men's movement was expanding its focus to include women. This curriculum, while marketed in Canada, is not endorsed by the Canadian chapter of Promise Keepers:

We got blind-sided by that. That was a project done in cooperation with PK U.S... there have been a lot of apologies made... their apologies were very deep and very sincere on this issue. They said "We have to stop making decisions that affect our affiliates all over the world." Now, since we are separate organizations, the only thing that we really share is the logo and the same statement of faith. But, even our vision statements are different now and the themes for our conferences. That [the curriculum] was done to help Chapel Ministries, but in no way did that represent an expansion out. We are called to men. Anything else would be to merchandise the ministry at the expense of what God has called us to do.

The Canadian chapter of Promise Keepers, operating independently from its American counterpart, does not plan to allow women to attend its conferences. The Promise Keepers leader's claim that the "Promises Worth Keeping" curriculum does not represent "an expansion out" seems contradictory, given that the following comment by the Vice President of the American chapter of Promise Keepers appears on the brochure which advertises the curriculum: "This new adventure captures the heart of PK's seven promises while challenging the entire church family to live what we say we believe."

Promise Keepers' tendency to pursue new areas of the reality-defining market may represent a strategy to strengthen the movement's plausibility structure. Simply put, the more people who attend the stadium events and appear to advocate the Promise Keepers' agenda, the more legitimate the movement's definition of reality appears to be. With regard to his experience at a stadium event, Rick recalled:

It was life-shifting... through the music and just being there. I was a new Christian... being there amongst fifty or sixty thousand men... it just brought validity and strength to Christianity.

The large numbers of men who attend the stadium events, according to this respondent, serve to reinforce the reality of the evangelical worldview, the religious perspective of which Promise Keepers is a part.

In the late 1990s, the decline in the number of men attending Promise Keepers events in the U.S. may explain why the American movement has expanded its ideology to include women, whereas the Canadian chapter has continued to focus exclusively on men. Compared to 1996 when 1.1 million men attended Promise Keepers' stadium events held in twenty-two stadiums across the U.S., only 453,000 men attended stadium events held in nineteen stadiums during the 1998 conference season. For 1999, the U.S. men's movement planned fourteen stadium events. If a large number of supporters is required to give the movement the appearance of legitimacy and, therefore, to strengthen the movement's *plausibility structure*, then the American Promise Keepers movement may be expanding its focus to include women with the hope of increasing support. In contrast to the American movement, the Canadian Promise Keepers organization appears to have had a successful season in 1998. Whereas four arena conferences were held in 1998, the Canadian chapter of Promise Keepers planned five conferences for 1999. With a *steady group* of male supporters, the Canadian chapter of Promise Keepers has no need, so far, to market its product to women.

Berger's use of the market situation to describe the pluralism which pervades modern society provides a useful framework with which to analyze Promise Keepers' ideology. The market analogy, however, fails to account for all forms of religious

phenomena in contemporary society. For instance, liberal Protestants do not seem to engage in any explicit attempts to attract consumers. In a 1994 survey of United Church leaders and lay members in Canada, only 19 percent of members considered "sharing faith with others" to be "very important." Only 13 percent of members believed that evangelism was an important activity for the local congregation to be engaged in (Bibby 1994:23). This lack of support for evangelistic activities is, perhaps, based upon the belief that the Christian Church offers only one among many possible definitions of reality. Bill Phipps, the current moderator of the United Church of Canada, rejects the belief that Jesus provides the only way to God (Harvey 1997) and, in an article which appeared in the influential Canadian magazine *Maclean's* exploring the contemporary debate in liberal Protestant churches concerning the divinity of Christ, Anglican Bishop Michael Ingham is quoted as saying "We don't have a monopoly on God's truth" (Driedger 1997:41). By accepting the validity of other religious perspectives, liberal Protestants refrain from engaging in direct competition with other religious agencies. As a result, Berger's sociological theory of religion may prove to be useful only in examining more traditional expressions of religiosity, which have a tendency to reject the validity of other reality-defining agencies.

## CONCLUSION

Messner describes Promise Keepers as an "anti-feminist backlash." Promise Keepers literature, including Howard Hendricks' critique of the absence of male leadership in America's homes and Tony Evans' portrayal of "the feminization of the American male" as the cause of a "national crisis," provides evidence in support of Messner's assertion.

The research presented in this thesis, however, undermines Messner's analysis of the anti-feminist character of Promise Keepers. In many respects, the Promise-Keeping men interviewed for this research have appropriated feminist thought. Some Promise Keepers adhere to an egalitarian conception of gender roles, as exemplified in the notion of "mutual submission." Other Promise Keepers critique the emotionally restrained male and believe that men should adopt social qualities which are normally associated with femininity: open displays of emotion and affection to members of the same sex, the ability to share personal experiences with a person of the same sex, and the ability to ask for help when needed. Still other Promise-Keeping men reject a gender-based division of labour in the domestic and occupational worlds. While some respondents claim that the husband should fulfil his divinely ordained role as leader in the home, the concept of leadership is re-defined as "service and sacrifice." This redefinition of the concept of leadership displays a sensitivity to the feminist agenda. Many Promise Keepers believe that feminist opposition to Promise Keepers is based

upon an inaccurate portrayal of the men's movement. The implication of this assertion is clear: provided with an accurate depiction of the men's movement, feminists would cease to be antagonistic, realizing that the Promise Keepers' movement does not oppose the feminist agenda.

While it may be incorrect to label the men's movement as anti-feminist, Promise Keepers' gender ideology is ambiguous, simultaneously promoting both egalitarian and patriarchal gender ideologies. This ambiguity serves a practical function, enabling the men's movement to attract consumers from seemingly opposite areas of the reality-defining market. The elements of egalitarian ideology appeal to those consumers who believe in the fundamental equality of men and women. Promise Keepers' discussion of the need for male leadership appeals to those consumers in search of a patriarchal gender ideology. Furthermore, by adopting the ambiguous concept of "servant leadership," men can participate in Promise Keepers without having to opt for either an egalitarian or patriarchal gender ideology.

Promise Keepers' concurrent adoption of contradictory gender ideologies does not appear to have weakened the movement's plausibility structure. Rather, since group action results from the alignment of individual actions, the ambiguous symbols reflect the views of individual Promise Keepers. The maintenance of an ambiguous discourse on gender serves a practical function, enabling the men's movement to attract men who hold differing gender ideologies.

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