



Promise Keepers: We, Maybe; God, Certainly

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Promises! They are made often. They are broken often. Human relationships are based on promises. Contracts and covenants, verbal and written, structure the agreements we make with one another. People who make promises generally expect to keep them. But what happens when a promise is broken?

Promise Keepers has exploded onto the religious scene. The Christian and social commitments men make in the stadiums, if they cause changes in behavior and attitudes, could have tremendous impact on people and institutions. But what happens when a promise is broken?

The feminist movement marks a paradigm shift; as women move toward greater equity and equality, men are caught in the transition, and many are angry and fearful. Men are expected to change their patterns of behavior; some feel such changes emasculate them. A redefinition of what it means to be male in today's society is being sought. Equity and equality demand a new style of interaction between men and women as well as between men and men. Some men do not want to change; others make promises, but not all promises are kept. And what happens when a promise is broken?

Promise Keepers rallies men to review their behavior; speakers call upon them to respond to God's call by making seven promises. The sports-arena atmosphere encourages an emotional response to counteract the hurt and pain that exist in men's lives. One fellow behind me at the conference I attended said, "It isn't what I hear, it isn't what I see that is important! Is the fact that 54,000 men are here together talking about faith." The dynamic speakers, the excellent music, the mass of men make it easy to make a promise. But what happens when a promise is broken? The response of men to the Promise Keepers phenomenon and the million-men march on Washington strongly suggest that men want to be heard. Those of

us in men's ministry must find ways to listen! Men have been asked to claim a new sense of what it means to be a man in today's society. Men have participated, have become enthusiastic, and many have agreed to a new sense of direction. But what happens when a promise is broken?

My own participation with and conversations about Promise Keepers have made me very aware of men's need for care and support during this time of social transition. The church needs to respond. Many Christian men have had this mountain-top experience. Where do they go afterwards? To the traditional men's program in their churches? Hardly! But where will they go after the promises have been made—further, what happens when a promise is broken?

What are men saying when they respond as they have to these movements? Can a

hierarchical church structure respond quickly enough? When men return to our congregations, are we able to acknowledge their enthusiasm and tap into it in such a way that the energy will multiply? The promises generate energy and a potential for synergy. But what happens when a promise is broken? After all we are sinful beings.

A personal story: Surgery (a five way by-pass and a stainless steel heart valve) forced me to deal with my sense of mortality. I assumed my faith formation would provide me what I needed. I was amazed because it did not suffice! I found my comfort in my mother's faith, her sense of grace and forgiveness. After the episode, I wondered, "Why could I not tap into my own source of faith? After all, I have been active within the church all these years." I concluded that I had been involved in the faith but never really engaged. I think this typifies the male story: We have been involved but not engaged. No longer is merely being involved sufficient for men. They are seeking a redefinition of what it means to be a man in this time of transition. The single institution in our society with the potential to help men during this time should be the church. Promise Keepers, a non-denominational movement, has provided the spark. But after the promises have been made and sometimes broken, what then?

The task for Lutheran Men in Mission and other Christian men's movements is to find concrete ways to assist those who have every intention of keeping their promises and to support those unable to keep them. Grace and forgiveness abound and provide the core for the appropriate response. The development of a men's ministry that emphasizes God's promises of grace and forgiveness will help men move through this difficult time to a new sense of mutuality between men and women as well as between men and men. We have God's promise!

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Promise Keepers: A Call to Faithfulness

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An intelligent, middle-aged man turned to me as one of the special speakers for Promise Keepers waved his hands and shouted into the microphone. The man looked quite uncomfortable and speculated on the secret, right-wing political agenda that the leadership must have.

Were they gearing up for the 1996 presidential election? he wondered. Were they secretly planning a mass movement in the name of *intolerance* in order to take control of the country? The possibilities, in this man's mind, were endless.

Statistically, the Christian men's movement has mushroomed from 72 participants in 1990 to nearly 720,000 last year. One conference was replaced by seven in 1994 and thirteen last summer. In 1996, over a million conferees are expected at some 20 to 25 events.

Something big is happening. And that something is gaining momentum.

In many years as a full-time Christian worker, including serving in the pastorate and as a college and seminary teacher, I have had the opportunity to see quite a few different attempts to influence the minds, lives, and behaviors of groups of people in the name of God. Some are outrageously shameful and manipulative; others sincere, yet a bit misguided; and still others seem to be on to something profoundly spiritual and life-changing for those who embrace the

teachings. So, in what category does Promise Keepers fall?

First, it appears to me that those who are most opposed seem to be driven largely by fear. Whether it is a fear of right-wing political indoctrination or fear of a resurgence of patriarchy and male dominance, there's something scary about 60,000 men gathering in one place, shouting, singing, cheering, listening to impassioned, conservative speakers talking about men taking leadership.

However, as *USA Today* reported (18 August 1995), the reality is far different than the fear. "Growing movement shows husbands, fathers new way," reads the subtitle. What is this new way? Husbands are urged to promise to be faithful to

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their wives. Fathers are encouraged to make time with their children a high priority. Men are told that they are needed in the local church and that they need to rally around their pastors to support the ministries of their parish. Racial reconciliation is urged and modeled. Above all, they are told that their commitment to God and Jesus Christ needs to be the centering element of their lives.

Did I like everything I saw and heard the two times I attended? No, I didn't. I would have liked more emphasis on grace and more religious and ethnic diversity. But what is at the heart of the movement? What is good about it?

If we listen to the message in the spirit in which it is given—not in the spirit of those who attack it out of fear—we will recognize a call and a cry deeply rooted in biblical precedent.

For example, Deuteronomy is a testimony to Israel's belief in the absolute necessity of reminding ourselves regularly and dramatically of our covenant promises and priorities. Specifically, the *Shema* became Israel's way of verbally expressing the primacy of their commitment to God: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5).

Then, in the next breath, this covenant responsibility is extended to family life: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6:6-9).

Admittedly, Promise Keepers goes beyond the Hebrew model by calling men to remember the covenant with their wives, specifically by making them a priority in their lives and loving them faithfully. Further, it calls for honoring one's pastor and for racial reconciliation. What Promise Keepers omits is any instruction for women. There is never a word about wives submitting or men ruling the home. For many, however, the extension to love of wives and the omission of patriarchal domination are refreshing.

I came away with more courage and confidence in my faith, realizing I am not alone in my faith and devotion to God. I came away eager to communicate how special my wife is to me and how much I dearly love my children. I came away a better man—and whatever that means, it means that I feel more centered and empowered to serve my God and Savior and to love my family better than ever.

I have made some very important promises in my life. I am not afraid of being reminded in loud and dramatic ways to remain faithful and loving. On the contrary, I appreciate it.

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