



A Promise Not Yet Made: Reflections on the Promise Keepers Movement

by **Rev. Marie M. Fort**

The media are fascinated; the political pundits are intrigued; the public is puzzled. Any movement that gathers 50 - 60,000 men in cities across the US for prayer and commitment to sexual purity deserves some attention. The Promise Keepers (PK) movement is attracting thousands of men promising to take responsibility for themselves and their families. This is exactly what feminists have been wanting for years, isn't it?

To their credit, the PK movement hones in on the fact that families are facing enormous pressures and are in need of strong adult leadership. It also challenges their members' racial prejudice and urges that they look past another man's color when judging him. The PK movement encourages men to talk to each other, to share their feelings and fears, and to refrain from sexual acting out -- all in the context of conservative Christian theology which emphasizes male headship in the family, and also in the absence of women's voices.

One gets the impression from the PK program that for the last few years, men's problem is that they have been couch potatoes, passively reneging on their responsibilities to participate in their marriages and families. The PK movement calls men to get up and "take back" their rightful role as heads of their households. Perhaps for some, male passivity and irresponsibility have gone hand in hand.

But statistics suggest that it is male activity, not passivity that is more of a problem: Five million females aged 12 or older are victimized each year and 75% are assaulted by someone the victim knows (National Crime Victimization Survey, 1995). "At least half of the babies born to teen-age girls are fathered by adults" (NYT, Aug. 2, 1995). This impression is punctuated by the crime reports on the local news and by celebrity headlines from O.J. Simpson and Senator Robert Packwood to actor Hugh Grant and boxer Mike Tyson.

What is disturbing about the PK movement is what is missing from their agenda. There is no mention of men's responsibility for violence against women and children; there is no promise to stop hitting, raping and harassing women and to stop abusing children.

Sadly, the PK movement is more of the same, rather than offering a real alternative to men. Wrapped in religiosity and the aura of sports, the PK movement can only offer the restoration of a failed patriarchal model of a "real man;" that is, the man who is in control, in charge and, increasingly, in trouble.

There is no real puzzle about why men are attracted to the Promise Keepers. It allows them to clean up their public act without really changing, without having to face their conduct towards women and children. It provides them a context (the sports stadium) where they are comfortable, where they know what to expect, where they can bond with other men in "appropriate" ways, where their expectations of power and control are reinforced, and where all of it is baptized in Christian fundamentalism. For some this is exactly the reassurance they need as they are confronted with shifting gender roles and expectations, radical changes in their economic lives, and general uncertainty. For others who are genuinely looking for more than the isolated, macho, sexually promiscuous male role, the PK movement looks like an alternative. But it isn't. It is the squeaky clean version of the same story.

The New York Times headline following the Beijing Conference should be a wake-up call to the Promise Keepers: "Women's Meeting Agrees on Right to Say No to Sex." If the Promise Keepers would incorporate women's concerns about male behavior and really confess and confront their responsibilities

for the harm done to women in both the private and public spheres, then this just might be a movement with real promise that would be genuine good news for men and women. The Promise Keepers have one more promise to make and keep: "I promise not to seek control in my relationships with women and not to in any way force or coerce women sexually." We women are waiting.

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