2002

Humble Servants, Prideful Patriarchs: Submission and Servanthood in Rhetoric of the Promise Keepers

Erica J. Smith
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd
Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Religion Commons, and the Rhetoric Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-pkds-jf05

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
HUMBLE SERVANTS, PRIDEFUL PATRIARCHS:
SUBMISSION AND SERVANTHOOD
IN RHETORIC OF THE PROMISE KEEPERS

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Erica J. Smith

2002
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Author

Approved, April 2002

Richard S. Lowry

Maureen A. Fitzgerald

Leisa D. Meyer
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK'S SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND ORIGINS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SERVANT LEADER: HUMBLE – AND SUPERIOR</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGES: COOPERATIVE CHILDREN, DEPENDENT WOMEN</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CO-FOUNDER'S WIFE:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“FOLLOWING BILL OR FOLLOWING JESUS”</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECONSTRUCTING POWER IN PK'S THEOLOGY</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people were critical to the completion of this thesis, but none more so, of course, than my committee: Rich Lowry, Maureen Fitzgerald, and Leisa Meyer. Each of you enriched my life in life-changing ways, for which I will always be grateful.

I also thank my parents, Don and Sue Smith, whose lives led me to ask about gender and other issues in the first place; my siblings, Kim and Jeff, for your encouragement and cheerleading; Ed, for your scholarly advice; friends whose lives gave me important insights; and my girls, Roo and Sophie, for your talents at paper shredding and paperweighting, as well as your loving companionship.

Last, I thank George Tripodi and Kelly Crace. Your vision and wisdom have given me my beacons and my mantras.
This thesis examines submission and servanthood in rhetoric of the Promise Keepers, a Christian men’s organization dedicated to “raising up a new generation of godly men” who will change the world for God through their humble service and leadership, especially in their families.

Through an examination of six PK texts and other materials, the thesis argues that, first, Promise Keepers represents an effort to establish men’s dominance in the home, but in a “soft” way that responds to men’s sense of hollowness, isolation, and failure, and, evidently, to women’s criticisms of their behavior. Men, according to the ministry, are the linchpin of God’s order in the world and must be humble “servant leaders,” as Christ was. Second, the thesis finds that spokesmen’s writings and actions reveal thinking that is often arrogant, self-involved, focused on male power and authority, and contemptuous of women and “the feminine” — even though the ministry’s masculine ideal appropriates “feminine” traits. Further, men generally “submit” to God/Jesus and to Christian male authority, but they “serve” their wives. Women are consistently portrayed in ways that justify men’s authority: Women are weak, plaintive, and ignorant, and have no identity or worth without a man.

The thesis argues, third, that although the arrogant tone contradicts the ministry’s masculine ideal of humility, PK finds support among men and women for spiritual, and practical, reasons, and women use the PK ideal to hold men accountable and to improve their own lives. Promise Keepers provides an important critique of men’s irresponsible behaviors and its recognition that many men are isolated, wish for a personal relationship with a father, and seek a God who is loving, patient, and forgiving. Still, PK presents risks to women and to men.

The texts examined for this study include the PK Men’s Study Bible, four collections by multiple authors, materials on the organization’s Web site, and an autobiographical account by co-founder Bill McCartney and his wife, Lyndi. Her writings challenge his claims that he is her gateway to the sacred and to fulfillment. These challenges — and her support for the “servant leader” ideal and commitment to marriage — help to show why Promise Keepers has support among women despite its aggressive words. Her account also suggests that women have had a hand in the moderating of its expressions over time.
HUMBLE SERVANTS AND PRIDEFUL PATRIARCHS:
SUBMISSION AND SERVANTHOOD
IN RHETORIC OF THE PROMISE KEEPERS
INTRODUCTION

In an age when most Americans appear, at least, to accept women reasonably as equals of men, why would an organization like Promise Keepers spring up, advocating a masculinity of "servant leadership" in the home, if not as part of a men’s backlash against feminism? When a minister tells men that they have lost their role of leadership and must "reclaim their manhood," and says, "I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back," what are people to think of PK if not as some extremist tool of the Religious Right? ¹

The Promise Keepers organization may indeed be all these things, as many of its critics have claimed. Certainly it has the support of high-profile figures on the Right.² But its advocacy of men's "servant leadership," with the correlate of wifely "submission" or "following," draws on familiar — if contested and negotiated — concepts among conservative evangelicals whose compelling concerns include God’s "order" of and for "the family." Indeed, many women support the goals of Promise Keepers, and

work behind the scenes at its stadium conferences, which PK says have drawn about 3.5 million men in the U.S. and 100,000 more overseas.3

In this study, I examine Promise Keepers’ rhetoric, especially of servant leadership and submission, for what it may say about the writers’ sense of male power and prerogatives, and I juxtapose that rhetoric against real-life accounts by the wife of a PK co-founder. I make three central arguments in this thesis. First, I argue that Promise Keepers does indeed represent a concerted effort to establish men’s primacy in “the home,” and that, second, PK does so in a way that appeals not only to men but also to women. PK says that men, who it says are meant to be like Jesus, must be humble servants completely submissive to God. Such humility and desire to serve, PK says, will elevate men to the most important job there is: servant leadership, especially in the home, which is at the core of society’s well-being – or downfall. Indeed, PK says God chooses men for this critical role, undeserving though they may be. Power and humility, then, are complementary. Men become victors, and women get an active partner in marriage and childrearing. Because the ministry opens men’s behaviors to criticism and change – by self, by men’s small support groups, by ministers, and even by wives – women have reason to support Promise Keepers. However, PK is not necessarily a win-win situation for husband and wife, since no formal structure exists to support women’s integrity and dignity; since PK suggests that man is woman’s gateway to the sacred; and since men, too, can be harmed by obedience to PK’s theology. Third, I argue that Promise Keepers creates a credibility gap for itself because it signals a strong sense of “choseness” – to use Judith  

---

3 For women’s support, see, for example, Carol McGraw, “God’s Guys: They’re Called the Promise Keepers, Members of the Burgeoning Men’s Evangelical Movement Dedicated to Family and Prayer,” Orange County Register, 28 June 1995, 4p. Online. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe (4 Aug. 2001). For support by women clergy, see Bill Broadway, “Promise Keepers – and Doubters: Not All Clerics are Rallying Behind Men’s Religious Group,” The Washington Post,
Plaskow’s term — and noblesse oblige. Specifically, despite PK’s emphasis on humble servanthood, and despite its expressions of men’s yearning for a connection to God, other men, and family, the ministry creates an often arrogant and even contemptuous tone of male superiority and a pervasive — and generally subtle — denigration of women and “the female” that supports its argument for male dominance. Yet PK also appropriates for its masculine ideal those “feminine” traits that are useful to conservative Christian men who have been shortchanged by subscribing to mainstream masculine ideals that focus on men’s being aloof, focused on professional success, and sexually free outside marriage, among other things.

In expressing these concerns, I try to respect the writers’ commitment to faith while examining what may be their “unexamined cultural attitudes toward gender” and the implications of those attitudes for injustice and abuse of power, for squelching of women’s and men’s autonomous spiritual growth, for the exclusion of certain groups from the community of the “godly.” I recognize that in focusing on literature and leaders, I neglect the expressions of the rank and file, whose beliefs and expressions may be far different. Prescriptive literature cannot predict behavior, and the assertions in the writings may be more symbolic than literal. But words have the power to teach and to legitimate behaviors and attitudes, especially if buttressed by “God’s Word” and definitions of leader and led, “godly” and “ungodly,” as well as definitions of “healthy” and “sick” as deployed by the secular and conservative evangelical use of psychology.


4 Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 119. She is speaking of gender debates among evangelicals since the 1970s.
This Introduction summarizes the servant leader ideal, its historical context, and its biblical justification; summarizes my critique of PK’s servant leader rhetoric, including who wins and who loses; and presents the core analytical framework for the discussions in this study.

Promise Keepers describes itself as expressing “God’s movement among men today.”5 It is “a Christian men’s organization committed to raising up a new generation of godly men”6 by asking them to make a 25-year commitment,7 men who will “become all God originally intended them to be: men of integrity, men who keep their promises.”8 These men are modeled after both Jesus Christ and God the Father and will lead a renewed struggle against Satan’s work in the world. They are to be “conformed to the likeness of (God’s) Son” and are thus commanded to humble service.9 To help guide these men, PK asks them to repent of their sins, surrender their lives to God, and make “Seven Promises” and strive to keep them with the aid of a small group of like-minded “brothers” who hold them accountable:

1. A Promise Keeper is committed to honor Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God’s Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. A Promise Keeper is committed to pursue vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.
3. A Promise Keeper is committed to practice spiritual, moral, ethical and sexual purity.

---

5 Introduction, Promise Keepers Men’s Study Bible, NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997): xi (hereafter cited as Study Bible). PK also publishes a King James Version. Notes in the NIV are written by Dr. Kenneth Boa, Dr. Sid Buzzell, Dr. Gene A. Getz, and Bill Perkins, and were reviewed by a Promise Keepers board. See Acknowledgments, last page of the text.
8 Phillips, “Seize the Moment,” in Seven Promises 1994, 4. In late 2001, the organization altered its description of itself somewhat, saying it is “dedicated to igniting and uniting men to be passionate followers of Jesus Christ through the effective communication of the 7 Promises,” and it added a slogan to its “men of integrity”: “men transformed worldwide” (www.promisekeepers.org, Nov. 24, 2001).
4. A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection and Biblical values.

5. A Promise Keeper is committed to support the mission of the church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.

6. A Promise Keeper is committed to reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of Biblical unity.

7. A Promise Keeper is committed to influence his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.  

Separately from Promise 4, PK advocates men's “servant leadership,” a role in which men take responsibility for the well-being and salvation of all in their household.  

To some PK writers, a man's most important godly duty is to his family, to whom, as a man of integrity, he will make - and keep - his promises. A Promise Keeper, then, is a man who seeks to bring the world into line with God’s vision, partly by restoring the patriarchal family, and partly by re-forming masculinity, men's behaviors, and “the friendless American male,” as one writer calls it: “Men are self-reliant ... men don’t feel ... men don’t touch ... men don’t need fellowship ... men use people, love things ... men are too competitive ... men are too macho.”

PK echoes much of the commitment to “biblical roles” of manhood and womanhood that has characterized conservative evangelicalism since the 1970s, including its advocacy of men’s headship, which it calls “servant leadership.”

---

10 From the Study Bible, introductory pages.
13 E. Glenn Wagner, “Strong Brotherly Relationships,” Seven Promises 1999, 41-42. He blames socialization and “the lack of realistic role models” for creating destructive models such as this.
14 Bendroth 126. The emphasis on God’s created order as the source of female inequality has its roots in Calvinism (124). See also Randall Balmer on Puritan men’s role as “head of the household and the person responsible for the spiritual nurture and welfare of his children,” in “American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity,” Fundamentalism and Gender, John Stratton Hawley, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 49. PK’s ideology is consistent today with the Southern Baptist Convention’s formal endorsement in 1998 of men’s “servant leadership” and women’s...
fourth of PK's Seven Promises relates to men's role in the family and is most central to the PK doctrine of servant leadership: "building strong marriages and families through love, protection and Biblical values." PK asserts that proper leadership (and therefore "following") within marriage and the family are critical to repairing, then preserving, the nation's disintegrating moral and social order. In this vision, it is obedience and discipline that help to counter the selfishness and individualism that have replaced duty: Godly men and women adhere to specific, heterosexual, gender roles, each involving submission to an authority, each in accordance with specific male and female traits, each in atonement for the sin of rebellion in Eden.

PK roots this vision in its interpretation of Gen. 1 and 2: Adam created first, Eve as his helper, each a complement to the other, and every man and woman imprinted forever with God's curses incurred by the Fall. The Promise Keepers Men's Study Bible gives the following account. Adam and Eve — the forebears of all people today — disobeyed God's word, then chose not to accept responsibility for their decisions: Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. Rather than damning Eve for the Fall, the PK Bible panel lays the Fall first on Adam, "master of the blame game." He "failed his wife" by not providing her with proper spiritual leadership. God had put him in the Garden to watch over and protect it. But he and Eve listened to Satan, and "human appetite, relieved of responsibility to God, took over."15 "The result? Man's relationship with God was broken. In the process, the man failed his wife. From then on, they experienced times of contention in their relationship."16

---

16 "Man to Man," Study Bible, xxi.
The consequence of rebellion for Adam was a struggle to “provide for his family”; for Eve, “a struggle in her relationship with Adam,” as well as pain in childbearing. Translated into PK’s view, the Fall means that now man must struggle to provide for his family spiritually – not, it should be noted, so much economically, since so many women work alongside, or over, men in the paid labor force – and woman must struggle alongside him as he works to become a godly man.

Like Adam, men today have caused the damage to God’s order, PK says. Having inherited Adam’s “diseased spiritual DNA,” they have “failed their wives.” Men have abdicated their God-given roles of responsibility and leadership, forcing women to take over the leadership of families and churches, and Satan has gained a stronghold in the world. Only by men’s correcting and atoning for their disobedience, by reconciling with their Father and becoming “godly men” and “servant leaders” – leading families, churches, communities, nation, and world to God, and restoring God’s original created order – can Satan’s influence be defeated. If men are humble spiritual leaders, their wives and children will gladly follow the head of the household to godly living. Though husbands and wives will always suffer the “relational curse” incurred by Adam and Eve, knowing Christ as savior “brings an element of restoration to our marriages.” Couples must strive for “the oneness and the mutual love, respect, and support that God intended from the beginning.”

---

18 “Man to Man,” Study Bible, xxi.
20 On servant leadership, see, for example, “Marriage 101,” Study Bible, 1300; and Ken Davis, “The Servant Who Leads,” Seven Promises 1999, 99. PK rarely refers to female “submission” but when it does, such submission is consensual: She “allows” her husband to lead. See Gary Smalley and John Trent in What Makes a Man, 68, and Evans, “Spiritual Purity,” Seven Promises 1994, 80.
21 Getz, “Blame Game,” Study Bible, 8.
In its articulation of the servant leader ideal, Promise Keepers signals that a man is a woman's strength, her gateway to the sacred and to salvation – that he dictates the fullness of her life, that he is the linchpin of the created order. This interpretation is signaled partly by the teachings gleaned from Genesis, partly by PK's assertion that man is made in the image of God and is meant to be Christlike (while suggesting that women cannot be Christlike); partly by PK's images of women; and partly by PK's graphic design images, which suggest that the human father is himself a creator and savior – creator of the stable home, savior on the earthly plane.

The writings and speeches also signal a strong sense of "chosenness" — a conviction that they are elect, destined by God to take on a task that only they can execute to his standards. The term "chosenness" is Judith Plaskow's; though she applies it in her feminist analysis of Judaic thought, aspects of it apply remarkably to the Promise Keepers ministry. The ministry's expressions reflect a sense of "difference" that is, to use Plaskow's words, "a matter of God's decision, God's mysterious and singular choice bestowing ... an unparalleled spiritual destiny. This difference is a hierarchical difference, a statement of privilege – even if burdensome and unmerited privilege – in relation to those who are not chosen." PK's sense of chosenness, combined with PK's continuing the historical tendency of Christian fundamentalist men to valorize maleness, yields a rhetoric whose quality is often sharply at odds with the ministry's claim of humble servanthood. Although the writers and speakers at times express an attitude of humility and repentance, and

22 PK writings differ in asserting just how literal this "image of God" is, but the overall sense is one of a more literal approach, with lay writers more literal than the biblical commentators. In Christian theology overall, the image of God as male is not necessarily literal, notes Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 239-242.
sometimes say men need and want the help of their wives, there also exists a strong thread of male entitlement, superiority, and self-importance, of noblesse oblige.

This thesis does not attempt to explore all possible factors in the creation of Promise Keepers, nor to explain the variations in tone that are evident in the writings and speeches. But the ministry does appear to reflect a desire to construct a workable masculine ideal that fits with politics of “the family” and fills a longtime need while allowing enough flexibility to attract support by men and women of varying backgrounds – and also provides enough symbolic or real separation from secular culture. The rhetorical aggressiveness may be explained partly by men’s being outnumbered by women in church congregations, though not in pastor positions.  

Indeed, PK’s commitment to evangelistic unity is a unity of men, rather than a unity of all believers. Although PK’s core principles assert a commitment to racial “reconciliation,” PK makes no commitment to reconciliation with Christian women wronged by men, as Rebecca Merrill Groothius and Douglas Groothius observe, whether by neglect, for example, or by battering. The organization’s writers and speakers emphasize “honoring” and “respecting” wives. But as this thesis shows, PK

23 Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 96-107 but especially 99-100, from which the quoted material is drawn.
24 Even in 1999/2000, evangelical pollster George Barna found that women were “29 percent more likely to attend church” than men. Though 45 percent of women said they attended church during the week before the poll, 35 percent of men responded similarly. Still, women had reduced their church attendance by 21 percent since 1991, Barna found. He attributed the decline to burnout. Men were 90 percent of the pastors, but women held most of the leadership positions and “shoulder most of the responsibility for the health and vitality of the Christian faith” in the United States. See “Women Are the Backbone of the Christian Congregations in America,” 6 March 2000. Online. Internet. http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=47&Reference=4 (4 Aug. 2001). Also, Margaret Lamberts Bendroth observes that in the 1970s evangelical gender battles, “demands for more women leaders only served to underline the socially vulnerable position of evangelical men in a largely female-dominated constituency” (Fundamentalism and Gender, 123).
25 Wagner, “Strong Brotherly Relationships,” Seven Promises 1999, 46. Wagner, PK’s primary articulator of formal doctrine in that volume, notes that men must “accept and appreciate differences” in one another, as long as they are all committed to “the authentic, biblical Jesus” (“Biblical Unity and Biblical Truth: A Necessary Tension,” appendix, 244, his italics).
portrays women as emotionally and morally weak, unfit to be leaders and rather requiring the care, leadership, protection, and direction of men. Even in the PK Study Bible, whose tone is consistently more low-key than that of the lay writers, this message continues — with, of course, the commentators' interpretation of Eve's disobedience: Her sin was to doubt the legitimacy and authority of God's Word. She listened to doubts, engaged in "theological debate," and doubted the supremacy of God's character. This commentary, combined with the assertion that Adam failed to lead, yields the suggestion that if only he had not been so passive and eaten of the fruit which she had offered him, none of the world's problems would have happened. Moreover, PK's interpretation seems to suggest not only that woman is the gateway to sin but also that woman is wedge between men and their Father. Despite the PK focus on men, Eve can be seen as taking the blame for all that is at the root of PK's origins, and Eve, the Bible commentators say, set the pattern for all women, as Adam did for all men.

Yet as Bill McCartney's wife, Lyndi, shows, certain women may support Promise Keepers, for reasons spiritual and secular. Though a leftist feminist may view PK's theology as unfair and disrespectful, a conservative Christian may view it as God's plan, and may be certain that submitting to that divine intent brings rewards and humility beyond the comprehension of nonreligious people. Certain women also may have much to gain from PK's advocacy of men's responsibility to their families and of men's emotional openness, as offshoot women's groups such as Promise Reapers and A Promise Kept suggest. Promise Keepers' articulation of a masculine standard provides men — and women — sanctioned relief from the pressures

of twentieth-century machismo. It tells men that they have been to blame, shifting the primary focus away from anti-feminism and even, perhaps, playing on men's guilt. In contrast to commercialized sex and the highly public objectification, exploitation, and assaults on women's bodies and psyches, PK tells men that they should not view women as sexual objects, nor their own bodies as tools of sexual conquest and resultant self-esteem. It tells men that God measures a man's success by his relationship with his wife and children, not by his career prowess or his self-reliance, and that he should share responsibilities in the home. It tells men that they should be nurturing, responsible, sexually faithful, and protective fathers and husbands — and it tries to teach them how — because God loves his children even when they are disobedient. It tells men that they need love and close male friends. And, Promise Keepers tells men that they can, and should, be obedient to a higher power, and that they can bask in the presence of the sacred. All of these, PK tells men, they can and should do — without fear of being considered a “sissy.” And yet PK's rhetoric also appeals to whatever desire men may have to be heroes, to be leaders, to be authorities. They are waging the ultimate fight, against the “Adversary,” Satan.  

Though Promise Keepers can help men to act more respectfully toward others and themselves, there are risks, as with any theology that defines leader and led, “godly” and “ungodly,” and uses psychological tools and concepts to reinforce its teachings. Indeed, this thesis questions the basic premises of a theology based on heterosexual Christian male dominance — or of any theology that privileges one group as superior to another.

27 “The Fall,” Study Bible, 6.
A definition of “patriarchal family” is in order here, as is an explanation of my use of the term “conservative evangelicals.” First, though PK’s core theology is fundamentalist, I describe it and other groups that approve of men’s “headship” with the more broad “conservative evangelicals.” This distinguishes them from evangelical feminists, a group opposed to men’s headship. In terms of patriarchy, I use a definition articulated by Linda Gordon: “a form of male dominance in which fathers control families and families are the units of social and economic power.”

Gordon’s concept of patriarchy works within a larger system of community, where the patriarchal fathers are held responsible to, and are potentially subject to sanctions by, other patriarchs and to women, “particularly senior women.” Gordon’s framework is apt because PK’s articulation of “servant leadership” suggests that the father holds the ultimate reins in the family, and because fathers are held accountable certainly to God and perhaps also to a church community and small groups of “brothers” and possibly sisters.

This thesis uses for its primary theoretical framework the arguments of Joan W. Scott, who argues that gender is not simply roles or ideals but, more broadly, reflects a process of asserting, contesting, and maintaining power. Gender, in her definition, is “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships

29 PK’s central doctrine professes the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary atonement, Christ’s physical resurrection and his literal second coming, miracles, and Scripture as the inerrant word of God – criteria cited by Bendroth as marking fundamentalism (Fundamentalism and Gender, 4). See “Promise Keepers Statement of Faith,” Study Bible, xv-xvii. Certain PK leaders also express a belief in signs and visions – practices to which original fundamentalism was hostile – and belong to charismatic congregations and denominations including the Vineyard movement and Pentecostalism. Indeed, James Ryle, a pastor in the Vineyard church, is a prominent speaker in PK’s 2002 season. In this way and others, PK reflects Bendroth’s observation that today’s evangelical movement incorporates “old-line fundamentalism” and the charismatic “‘born-again’ phenomenon.” (“Fundamentalism and the Family: Gender, Culture, and the American Pro-Family Movement,” Journal of Women’s History 10 (1999): 4. 12p. Online. Expanded Academic ASAP. 15 May 2000.

of power.” Gender is “a crucial part of the organization of equality or inequality. Hierarchical structures rely on generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationship between male and female.” “Man” and “woman,” she argues, “themselves have no ultimate, transcendent meaning.” Rather, they are given meaning by “different actors and different meanings ... contending with one another for control.” Positing male and female as natural, binary opposites is one way in which power is justified: “The reference must seem sure and fixed, outside human construction, part of the natural or divine order.”31 Further, Ursula King explains one link between gender and religion: “Our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage, even when this is rejected. Religious traditions, beliefs and practices too are shaped by and perceived from the perspective of gender.” Religion itself “structures reality — all reality, including that of gender — and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human.”32

In keeping with Scott’s and King’s frameworks, the first decade of Promise Keepers appears to be an object lesson in studying gender as encompassing power relations, and the meanings of “reality” and humanness. PK may well have started out in part as a backlash against female power, but its ideals and expressions surely also reflect conservative Christian women’s contesting men’s irresponsibility and absence from their families. Bill McCartney’s wife, Lyndi McCartney, herself criticizes the “sinful, misdirected, and self-centered” behaviors of men who call themselves Christians.33 Christian women have exercised this critique of male behavior while simultaneously rejecting liberal or radical feminist challenges to a

patriarchal God, and praising the “traditional” virtues of heterosexual womanly roles, marriage, motherhood, and “the family.” 34 PK’s expressions of its doctrines also have changed markedly since the ministry’s early years. Judging by the nature of the ministry’s writings, the debate among Christians about whether PK is “biblical,” and accounts by Lyndi McCartney, it appears that PK’s approach has been changed by challenges inside and outside its ranks. 35

Still, if a theology reflects what its creators most value — as Francis Schussler Fiorenza and Gordon D. Kaufman suggest — then PK’s theology appears to most value, and it glorifies, heterosexual maleness, in Mary Daly’s framework. 36 Or, in the thinking of Judith Plaskow, it expresses a heroic and powerful male “chosenness.” Rooted as it is not only in fundamentalist machismo but also in the “muscular Christianity” of athletic culture, PK speaks often of the rigors of following God’s Word, of suffering in God’s name, of spiritual struggle, of saving family and community and nation. A real faith, PK says, is a man’s faith, demanding and difficult. 37 Although PK tells men that they must be submissive to God, it also suggests that they are morally superior — to gay men, to women, to non-Christians — with frequently frightening rhetoric and implications for those deemed “ungodly.” The ministry mandates heterosexuality, condemning homosexuality as a sin, but also

34 For such discussions, see Kristin Luker, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 159-165; R. Marie Griffith, God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 204-9; and Brasher, 151-3. For a discussion of newly Orthodox Jewish women’s critique of secular life, see Debra Renee Kaufman, Rachel’s Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991): 7-14.

35 A general Web search, such as with google.com, produces myriad discussions and polemics. A more balanced review is at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_pk.htm (1 Aug. 2001).


37 In this regard, Promise Keepers follows “first-wave” fundamentalists’ rhetoric as well as rhetoric of the Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-12. See Gail Bederman, “‘The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough’: The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism.” American Quarterly 41, no. 3 (1989) 432-465. Online. JSTOR. (2 Oct. 1999). See also Bendroth’s
has said gay men are welcome as long as, in the words of one observer, “they check their sexual identity at the door.”38 As for women, PK’s suggestion that men, not God or women themselves, should create women’s identities and their spiritual and emotional security has implications for what Plaskow and Carol Christ call women’s “full human dignity” before God,39 and for the ordination of women.40

Certain Promise Keepers writers and speakers, and of course the two founders, have a foot in the sports world. Aside from Bill McCartney (former head football coach at the University of Colorado) and co-founder Dave Wardell—who together got the idea for PK on the way to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes conference—Tony Evans is chaplain for the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, and Howard Hendricks was chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys. Arguably, PK’s success has come in part because it stages rallies in stadiums, locales that allow it to draw on participants in Christian athletic culture and to attract men who may be better-versed in football and other sports than in Christianity. For the latter group, PK’s use of sports metaphors—game, coach, team, players, the opposition, play book—may provide a familiar language that is a bridge to the unfamiliar and perhaps intimidating—as well as to religion, a world that has been stereotypically female. The use of sports language also encourages men to act, not simply to sit on the sidelines,

---

40 Power struggles within churches are another concern raised by PK’s theology. There is a history of men’s contesting women’s power in religious organizations, as Bederman’s and others’ work show. Those struggles continue. For an overview of the “stained-glass ceiling” in the Southern Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal church, and
for PK argues that action is crucial to winning this ultimate game, the struggle against evil. Moreover, the language provides an analogous framework for men to grasp and perhaps follow PK’s theology. The “team” analogy signals that group effort, not individualism, is called for in this game against Satan; it also provides men a sense of belonging, a talisman against emotional and spiritual isolation. The “coach” trope conveys the critical message that the heavenly Father is the one leader to whom all men (“players”) must submit if victory is to be achieved. (In turn, men may be “coach” to their family teams, and their wives may be their “MVPs.” Likewise, a minister may also function as a coach.) The coach has a “play book,” whose clear rules, followed explicitly, assure eternal victory. The urgency of the need to follow “Coach,” to play by the rules, to work as a team, is signaled in part by the name of Bill McCartney’s radio program, “4th and Goal” — whose title refers to a team’s fourth, last, chance to gain critical yardage before it forfeits the ball to the other team.

Not only is sports a place where men may feel safe in being physical and emotional with other men, but also it — especially football — has been an overwhelmingly male arena where “maleness” is celebrated, largely free from the change that women are effecting in the larger society. Historian Mary Jo Festle observes: “In a backlash against feminist gains in economics, politics, and social life, ... many men have clung to sports such as football as a symbol of men’s ‘natural'
superiority. In football, men are in charge and women irrelevant at best. Football venerates male power and male bodies. ..."43 Promise Keepers' theology asserts the primacy of male power, though not male brutality. With PK, then, sports language, and the sports arena, provide a familiar ground, a means of acquaintance with a rigorous faith, and a reinforcement and celebration of male power and authority,

Ideologies like PK's can be perpetuated by the emphasis on the hierarchical family where the patriarch is accorded the authority to be “spiritual leader” of the home. Reinforcing this patriarchal, heterosexual family mandate are the concepts of “the ‘psychological,’ ” as Nancy Schnog and Joel Pfister describe the twentieth-century “industry” of self-making and self-expression. As “male” and “female” have no intrinsic meaning, in the words of Joan Scott, so language, symbol, and concept play “powerful roles ... in the definition of human personality.”44 Significant numbers of PK writers are secular or pastoral counselors, such as child psychologist Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, and thus in a position to authoritatively label as psychologically “unhealthy,” and spiritually “ungodly,” those people whose behaviors and attitudes do not fit the norm of heterosexual, Christian, male dominance. Notably, one prominent speaker and writer for PK – Tony Evans of Dallas, the one who says men must “reclaim their manhood” – is a pastor and close friend of now-President George W. Bush. 45

With a concern for “servant leadership,” “submission,” and power in mind, then, the thesis examines four essay collections, an autobiographical account, and the

---

44 Scott, 1063.
Promise Keepers Men's Study Bible, as well as some materials from the Promise Keepers Web site.\footnote{Gail Sheehy, “The Accidental Candidate,” \textit{Vanity Fair}, October 2000. Online. Internet. Available at www.gailsheehy.com/Politics/politicsindex_bush3.html (31 May 2001).} (The thesis often describes materials as “early” or “earlier” and “later,” with the former being those published by 1996, and the latter published in 1997 and 1999.) Although prescriptive literature and autobiographical accounts have their limits – one cannot predict behavior, the other is highly self-conscious – they do provide an important starting point.

Structurally, the thesis chapters generally present PK's assertions first, followed by analysis and commentary. The first chapter examines the ministry’s critique of late twentieth-century society and the solutions PK articulates. The chapter also explains PK's scriptural rationale for the “servant leader” concept and places the concept in the context of conservative evangelicalism and business management. The second chapter examines PK's rhetoric of servant leadership and submission with an eye to tone and the subtle shift of wording: from men's “submission” (to males) to men's “serving” and “leading” (of females). Implicit in this rhetoric, of course, are images of men: how they are, how they should be. Chapter 3 also examines images — images of women and children, images that PK crafts and uses to support its mandate of servant leadership. Chapter 4 considers a real-life case: the relationship of Lyndi and Bill McCartney. Her account shows how wives may both support and resist PK teachings, supporting men's presence with families but contesting their claim to spiritual dominance. Chapter 5 deconstructs “servant
leadership,” examining ways that the message, as delivered by PK, can be used to make male dominance seem natural and eternal, and to fit people to its norm.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests some reasons that PK’s message has been popular with certain women, and it asks to what degree, and under what circumstances, the ministry’s spokesmen feel that a man can submit and still be a man – a godly man. The thesis asks whether it is true “submission” – humility and self-erasure, as PK often describes it – if a man is named the linchpin of the moral and social order, if he alone can be like Christ, and if he is in the image of the (male) God, and – in being so – he is the creator of his family and a godly nation and world.
CHAPTER I
PK'S SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND ORIGINS

This chapter examines Promise Keepers' assessment of the causes of, and solutions to, American problems today. At their core, PK says, is morality, especially by men, since it is men whom God has chosen to be his leaders of family and church. Men's return to godliness and to their patriarchal role is critical, PK argues, for the nation's salvation. The chapter also examines the origins of the Promise Keepers movement, both as the ministry tells the story and as is suggested by PK's context in the gender battles of evangelicalism. Last, the chapter outlines PK's vision of male "headship" in families – what it calls servant leadership, originally a business management term – and how servant leadership dovetails with wifely submission.

The Promise Keepers ministry argues that since the early to mid-1960s, the nation has been sliding toward eternal catastrophe, down a slippery slope of godlessness that is rife with the sins of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, fornication, and pornography; out-of-wedlock births, absent fathers, and divorce; drug and alcohol addiction; and violent crime and youth gangs. Churches are weak. Men and women are not acting as God intended; they are putting selfish desires before the good of

---

their families. "The evidence says men are still far more likely than women to break their marriage vows," Bill McCartney writes, with a quarter of women, and a third of men, reporting extramarital affairs. The easy availability of online porn and video sex is having a "catastrophic impact on traditional marriage and family," he says. 48 Families, the core of the nation's health, are falling apart. The family, writes Howard Hendricks, "is unraveling like a cheap sweater," and "Once the home goes, it's just a question of time before it all goes." 49

Throughout these critiques of late twentieth-century American society run a criticism of rampant individualism and "moral relativism," and a call for "biblical values." Political activist and child psychologist James Dobson criticizes "the discovery of personhood" and "the media blitz" that spread the "'me first' philosophy" of the 1970s and early '80s urging men and women "to do their own thing, to chase impulsive desires without regard for the welfare of their families." Fathers and mothers, too, are "energetically seeking fulfillment in the working world," buying into "the breathless American lifestyle" and turning their children into latchkey kids.50 Counselor Gary Oliver, another frequent writer and speaker for PK, says national moral decline began in 1966 with the publication of Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*; he criticizes the book itself or the general concept in the 1992, 1994, and 1999 collections.51

His basic premise was that nothing is universally good or bad, right or wrong. There are no absolutes. ... What was only a philosophical discussion in 1966 has become today the basis for morals in our society. Thirty-five years ago, our

51 *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, a controversial bestseller by the Episcopal professor and priest, was only one of many such ethical queries published during those years, according to McGrath, 255. Fletcher's book also was condemned by "pro-life" activists in Luker's study in the early 1980s (113).
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. If you take situation ethics to its logical conclusion, you end up with Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald.52

To Oliver, then, there was a godly time, a golden age, followed by a specific point at which evil took over, and a national decline. (Chapter 5 will critique Oliver's claims and others like them.)

Other writers blame "pride, classism, separatism, and racism" in the body of Christ and men's refusal to "surrender ... to the presence and movement of the spirit of God."53 Some blame a lack of vitality in the churches, what PK writers in the early to mid-1990s call "feminization" — meaning, to them, an excess of female influence that has either silenced men or emasculated them (Chapter 3 will discuss such claims). Church and society are weak, lacking firm stands on moral issues; pastors are unsupported and overworked, and men generally feel unwelcome, feminized, "spiritually impotent," and "raped."54 Compounding these problems is that "many men who grow up in a feminized environment" are not independent in a healthy way but rather are over-dependent — codependent, people pleasers, say Gary Smalley and

54 Ken Abraham, "God Loves Losers, Too!" in What Makes a Man, 57, refers to "spiritual impotence." The critique of pastors’ situations is included in Dale Schlafer, “Honoring and Praying for Your Pastor,” 128. Also in that volume, Hendricks refers to "the rape of existing leadership," meaning the ignoring of older mentors to younger men ("A Mandate for Mentoring," 34), and Loritts refers to "the perceived rape of (his own) dignity" as a black man when God asked him to minister to the white man who had addressed him in hate (58-9). (Writers also appropriate the female in referring to "spiritual bulimia" [Steve Farrar, "Disorderly Conduct," What Makes a Man, 58-9], and "Promise Keepers have become impregnated with personal revival" [Wellington Boone, "Why Men Must Pray," Seven Promises 1999, 18].)
John Trent, who write popular evangelical advice books.\textsuperscript{55} If this pattern continues, writers say, boys will grow up like their fathers, and further generations of men will be tempted by secular standards of masculinity that advocate the pursuit of "individual glory" and ignore commitments; that focus on "pleasure-seeking and self-gratification" and sex without love, marriage, and commitment; and the pursuit of career prestige and what McCartney calls a "god (that) is the almighty dollar." \textsuperscript{56} And without proper actions and attitudes by husbands, wives will continue to have to pick up the slack, doing more than God intended.

The solution, to Promise Keepers, is revival among men. Men's atoning for their sins, and submitting to God's will for them, will start the process. If men are "servant leaders," churches and "the family" will be restored. Chapter 2 will examine the rhetoric of servant leadership further, but at base, according to McCartney, "God judges you by how happy your family is." \textsuperscript{57} Men "need brothers to help them keep their promises" – Christian brothers seeking God's ideal, providing spiritual and emotional support in a safe, all-male environment. \textsuperscript{58} And men must lead a war against "the enemy," Satan. This war must entail committed, fearless evangelizing, with God's word as the compass. "We men should lead the way – in our families, our churches, and our communities," writes Luis Palau. \textsuperscript{59} To McCartney, a unity of men, across racial and denominational lines, would make a church "far more united in obedience to God's command," a unity that "could unleash the fantastic potential God

\textsuperscript{56} The quoted material is from Bill McCartney, "Prologue: My Father’s Team and the Game of Life," in \textit{Sold Out}, xxvii, and "The Truth About Team," 115-125; also, \textit{From Ashes to Glory: Conflicts and Victories On and Beyond the Football Field} (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 246.
\textsuperscript{57} McCartney, "Sunday Morning Warrior," \textit{Sold Out}, 177.
\textsuperscript{58} The need for brotherly support is articulated in Promise 2: "A Promise Keeper is committed to pursue vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises." For the safety issue, see, for example, speaker and writer Ed Cole's comments in Kim Sue Lia Perkes, "Movement Challenging Men to Get 'Real'; Evangelical Founder Uses Bible as How-To Book," \textit{The Arizona Republic}, Sec. D, p. 6, 27 May 1995. Online. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe (4 Aug. 2001).
has given us to make a positive difference that no one else could possibly make.”

Gary Oliver says it this way: “We must make a commitment to be men who aren’t afraid to count the cost and then stand tall – at times seemingly alone, but in truth with thousands of other men who want to make their lives count.”

Smalley and Trent tell men: “People are counting on you to be a promise keeper – your wife, family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and fellow citizens. ... Despite the obstacles, the one thing we (who have chosen the straight and narrow path that leads to life) know is that our leader is Jesus Christ, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords.”

As PK tells it, the movement began as something of a brainstorming session between Bill McCartney and friend Dr. Dave Wardell in 1990. McCartney, then the head football coach at the University of Colorado, envisioned the energetic faith of Christian men gathering in a stadium to worship. By this time he had quit Catholicism for James Ryle’s Vineyard Church. The first gathering was local, with about 75 men in Boulder, Colorado. The next was national, a stadium rally in summer 1991 that drew 4,200. Randy Phillips, a top officer of the ministry, has said that “kairos,” a favorable, God-given opportunity, arose. To him, the test for those who are presented with the opportunity is “whether they will recognize it and respond in obedience to the One who is offering it, trusting in His ability to work through them to fulfill His purposes.” According to Phillips, the original 70-some men recognized this opportunity and “were elated by the idea of a movement that would put the focus on

---

59 Luis Palau, “The Great Commission,” Seven Promises 1994, 193,
60 McCartney, “A Call to Unity,” Seven Promises 1999, 156.
63 McCartney, “All That Glitters is Not Gold,” Sold Out, 111.
men.” The prospect was tantalizing: “Just what would it be like if men were reconciled to God and His will in every area of their lives?”

The historical context and the ministry’s advocacy of male headship suggest that Promise Keepers is not only an effort to fill a void in conservative Protestant ideals for men but also a volley in the evangelical gender struggles that began with renewed force in the 1970s. While conservatives felt “a genuine disillusionment and alarm over the excesses of individualism in North American society,” according to evangelical feminist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, evangelical feminists rejected the concepts of meek feminine submission, self-denial, and service, and argued for an interpretation of Scripture that was egalitarian. In essence, they rejected conservatives’ view of God’s created order. Conflicts between the two camps eventually led in 1989 to the Danvers Statement. That statement condemned “feminist egalitarianism” and said relations between the sexes should involve the “biblical roles” of male leadership and female submission: the “loving, humble leadership of redeemed husbands, and the intelligent, willing support of that leadership by redeemed wives.”

---

64 Seven Promises 1994, 4-7.
65 Margaret Lamberts Bendroth finds a lack of discussion within modern fundamentalism about proper male behavior, and confusion about the nature of “true Christian manliness,” Fundamentalism and Gender, 120 and 126.
In the 1970s, also percolating in conservative circles were the “family values” and “fatherhood” movements, as Judith Stacey notes in In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). See especially her chapter, “The Neo-Family-Values Campaign.” The “family values” campaign is exemplified by Dobson, the child psychologist and Promise Keepers essayist and speaker who established Focus on the Family in 1977, in alarm at the news of an international conference of feminists in Houston. See Stacey’s Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America (New York: Basic Books, 1990): 61-2. The fatherhood campaign includes people such as Ken Canfield of the Center for Fathering, also a PK writer and speaker.
67 Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 121-125.
68 David Harrington Watt, A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991). See his chapters “Feminism” (on evangelical and secular feminists) and “Counterfeminism,” 93-136. See also Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, on “the postwar search for order,” 105-7.
69 Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 1-2.
Despite the language of headship and submission, Bendroth suggests that such assertions have long been contested in fundamentalist and evangelical life, and that practice has been more variable than rhetoric would suggest. Even in the 1940s and 1950s, when the emphasis on strict hierarchy emerged, the “consistently embattled tone” of writings about women’s submission in the family “suggests that fundamentalists adopted this ethic with difficulty” and that hierarchy was no matter of consensus. In the 1970s, “a liberal or conservative perspective on the role of women was a powerful means of marking one’s stance toward secular culture, and the feminist movement in particular.” More recently, evangelical feminism has been gaining acceptance, especially among younger evangelicals — meaning, for example, “egalitarian marriage and shared child-rearing.”

Marie Griffith and Paul Harvey observe: “Even among religious conservatives the word [submission] does not suggest blind obedience so much as pliant cooperation and acceptance of familial obligations.”

PK’s writings reflect some of this egalitarianism but also the emphatic conservative emphasis on “family values,” and especially on family order and men’s headship. Its advocacy of men’s carrying their share of family and marital responsibilities suggests that PK is responding in part to women’s demands — feminist or not — but it also echoes core concerns of conservatives: divorce, abortion, teen pregnancy, and homosexuality. And it reflects David Harrington Watt’s finding that among conservative evangelicals, “the family,” not the Second Coming, had by

---

1975 become the primary arena of hope.\footnote{Watt, 4.} The ministry makes no explicit qualification about the limits of male authority or female submission, and the tone of its rhetoric varies from autocratic to nurturing. Yet hand in hand with that nurturing aspect is evangelicalism’s postwar acceptance of psychological “attitudes and practices as allies rather than adversaries of the Christian faith.”\footnote{Watt, 4. See also Bendroth, “Fundamentalism and the Family,” on “relational language” (6-7).} So while Promise Keepers reflects struggles over definitions of the ideal family order, it also adapts aspects of mainstream society. If one survey conducted at the 1997 national rally is an indicator, the followers appear to be similarly mainstream: The respondents then were mostly white, middle class, college-educated, and married, and were between 30 and 60.\footnote{The poll, conducted by the Washington Post during the 1997 Stand in the Gap rally, had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 and 5 percentage points. “Promise Keepers Poll,” \textit{The Washington Post}, 11 Oct. 1997, sec. C, p. 7. Online. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe (3 Aug. 2000).}

As for Promise Keepers’ ideal, its particular brand of men’s headship is one that it has come to call “servant leadership,” a term already fully in use in business-management circles by the time PK used it in its 1999 \textit{Seven Promises} and by the time the Southern Baptist Convention endorsed it for families in 1998.\footnote{Robert K. Greenleaf, a Quaker, conceived of servant leadership while an executive with AT&T in the 1970s. His book, \textit{Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness}, was published by Paulist Press, a Catholic publisher, and had sold 50,000 copies by 1994. His concept was inspired by his 1960s questioning of established authority, and by Hermann Hesse’s \textit{Journey to the East}. (Wal-Mart today calls its store supervisors “servant leaders” as well.) This filtering of a management/ethics term into religious masculinism is worth exploring, not least for what it may say about class aspirations – or for efforts to make middle-class men more comfortable with family obligations by using language with which they may already be familiar. Gail Bederman has found that the Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-12 also borrowed business management terms and techniques. It sought to “vitalize” feminized Protestantism by “making it as important to 20\textsuperscript{th} century men as the stock exchange or the railroads,” for example (“The Women Have Had Charge,” 445). On Greenleaf, see Walter Kiechel III, “The Leader as Servant,” \textit{Fortune}, May 4, 1992, 2p. Online. Expanded Academic ASAP (20 May 2000); and William Bole, “Servant Leadership, a 70s Concept, Opens Doors to Possibilities.” \textit{National Catholic Reporter}, April 8, 1994, 1p. Online. Expanded Academic ASAP (20 May 2000). Also, the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, online, www.greenleaf.org (30 May 2001). On Wal-Mart: Steve Early, “Prole Like Me,” review of \textit{Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America}, by Barbara Ehrenreich, \textit{The Nation} 272 (June 11, 2001), 52-3.} PK argues for men’s primacy in the home and for servant leadership by cobbling together various passages in the Bible. PK’s Promise 4 speaks most directly to these principles.
This promise entails a commitment to “building strong marriages and families through love, protection and Biblical values.” One aspect of men's commitment is stewardship: “Each of us is created in God’s image and each is responsible to protect and nurture what God created,” and men are “caretakers of his creation.” Each PK promise carries a “core issue,” and the core issue of this fourth promise is “servanthood.” The Bible's “key passage” for this core issue is Matt. 20:27. In this passage, the disciples argue among themselves about who shall have primacy among them. Jesus – “the second Adam” – interjects: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be 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” (NIV).

PK explains the “first-last” admonition as a warning against power-grabbing and as an instruction to serve, but does not explain how it justifies applying Jesus’ resolution of an argument among men to the institution of marriage. In the accompanying box, the commentator explains the passage in the context of Promise 2 (“vital relationships with a few other men”), emphasizing the need for helping, not rivalry. After all, the commentator says, Jesus told the disciples that “the key to true greatness isn’t in climbing over others, but in helping them up and serving them. From Jesus’ perspective men aren’t rivals who need to compete; they’re allies who need to help each other along on the journey of life.”

77 “Gen. 1:26-30: Made in God’s Image,” Study Bible, 4. Note that PK softens Scripture’s verb “rule.”
78 See also the accounts of Jesus’ admonition in Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 9:46. The Luke passage might challenge PK’s choice of the Matthew verses somewhat: “He who is the least among you all - he is the greatest” (NIV). Women could read this passage as empowering.
79 “Genesis: At a Glance,” Study Bible, 2.
80 The Study Bible refers the reader to other passages in which Jesus uses the first/last paradigm, none in the context of family headship. Three are in the context of quarrels among the 12 disciples, and two involve how to get into heaven. See Mark 9:35 and 10:43-45; Luke 9:48; and Matt. 18:1-5 and 23:11-12.
Although the PK Bible cites the Matthew verse as the “key passage” for the call to servanthood of Promise 4, it chooses Genesis to discuss the rationale for men’s role and headship in the family. First, it cites Gen. 2:18, the account in which God decides to make woman from Adam’s rib as a “helper suitable for him” because “it is not good for the man to be alone.” The PK narrator describes the arrangement:

Once and for all, Eve would be a part of Adam, not separate from him. Though she was uniquely female, Adam exclaimed, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh (2:23).’ She was the perfect woman. Then God established a plan for men and women of all time. Today we call it marriage.\(^8\) This created arrangement, then, would be eternal. Moreover, it would be God’s norm for women and for men, and any who would not conform would be imperfect and ungodly. God's idea of a “perfect woman,” in addition, is one who is inseparable from a man.

PK’s discussion says that men should view their wives as God’s gift to them and that they should also refer to Eph. 5:25-33, where Paul says men are to love their wives as themselves: “He who loves his wife loves himself.”\(^8\) There, the commentators offer a discussion titled “Marriage 101.” “God places a premium on a husband’s role,” they say. The writers comment that “some men and women who read Ephesians 5:22-33 get sidetracked on Paul’s instructions concerning wives’ responsibility to submit to their husbands.” These people “make the critical mistake of overlooking verse 21,” which reads, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Marriage, the writers say, “requires mutual submission, an attitude that doesn’t always come naturally.”

---
82 Getz, “Blame Game,” Study Bible, 7.  
83 This creation account is the second in Genesis. For a feminist analysis of the selective use of the two Genesis accounts, see Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread,” in Woman Spirit Rising.
What is this “mutual submission”? It is not the “mutual submission” advocated by evangelical feminists. The writers describe it this way:

It’s in that context that Paul tells husbands they’re to provide their wives with leadership. Not a heavy-handed, domineering, “I’m the boss!” kind of leadership. But the kind of leadership Christ exercises over the church—servant leadership. ... This powerful image shows the degree of commitment that God requires of husbands. As Christ gave his life for the church, so husbands are to give their lives for their wives and are to always put their wives’ needs before their own. In the context of such leadership, following becomes a delight.84

Men are told to take a “servant attitude” and vow that “by the grace of God, your love for her will emulate Christ’s complete and sacrificial love for the church,” embodied in everything from daily duties such as child care and housework to “major issues” such as consulting their wives first when a job opportunity arises. Men also are pointed to Phil. 2:3-11, where Paul writes that Christ, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. ... (H)e humbled himself and became obedient to death. ... Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. ...” Christ sets the example of “self-emptying” and “other-centered humility,” having “stripped himself of the full manifestation of his divine rights and attributes during his earthly life.”85

The commentators say a man should ask for God’s help in guiding him to make his marriage “conform to his reason for instituting it,” as shown in Gen. 2:18-23. That includes making his marriage permanent, reflecting “God’s perfect plan for marriage”; “If you’re married, ask God for the grace you need to keep your vows as

84 “Marriage 101,” Study Bible, 1300
diligently today as you did on the day you made them." Although in Song of Songs the
writer presents a beautiful portrait of marriage, husbands should not be discouraged
if their marriage doesn't match that ideal; rather, they should realize that "the Lord
can use trials in their marriage relationship to make them more like Christ, if they
are committed to serving him through serving their wives." 86

This chapter has outlined how the Promise Keepers ministry assesses the blame for what it deems America's moral decay, and PK's solutions: persuading men to turn to God; shoring up "the family" by convincing those men that God wants them to lead their families; and giving the men guidelines for doing so. The chapter has shown that the ministry's approach appears to be rooted partly in anti-feminist evangelicalism that took root particularly in the 1970s, and partly in business management philosophies. PK, then, is very much a product of a historical "moment" - an argument that will be explored further in Chapter 5 - and it aims to re-establish patriarchy, but in a "gentle" way that suggests PK is responding also to women's criticisms of men's behaviors. The next chapter explores PK's language of humility and suffering, and juxtaposes it with its language and iconography of heroism. The chapter focuses particularly on the servant leader aspect of the PK ideal - and when the servant leader "submits," and when he "serves" or "leads." The chapter shows that, in PK's rhetoric, men do not "submit" to a female.

CHAPTER II

THE SERVANT LEADER: HUMBLE – AND SUPERIOR

This chapter examines PK's rhetoric of men's servant leadership and submission: When does a godly man "submit," and when does he "serve"? When is he humble, and when not? First, the chapter briefly addresses broader aspects of the Promise Keepers ideal, including how that ideal is portrayed in graphic design. It then moves to PK's most clear mandate involving submission, the godly man's obedience to his Father and to other men in PK's small support groups. The chapter then considers areas where PK's message of humble service is ambiguous: men's obedience to female religious authority, and men's submission to their wives. PK writings and some speeches show that spokesmen clearly assert men's humility in relation to a male-sexed Trinity and to like-minded men, but not necessarily in relation to women, with the Bible commentators typically taking a more moderate approach than do the lay writers. Some spokesmen assert the need for full partnership with and respect for wives, but others speak of women as the "weaker partner" whose "significance" and "splendor" are assured only by a man's intervention on her behalf. On the whole, PK favors a unity of brothers in Christ – not brothers and sisters. These findings support the argument of this thesis that Promise Keepers is committed to male dominance and patriarchy, and that PK's rhetoric of humility is betrayed by a sense of men's innate superiority to women.
Although the PK writers seem to be consistent in their broad delineation of a servant leader’s duties, they are not of one mind about just how humble he should be. On the one hand, humility is a frequent subject. It is the first trait of a godly man listed by Phillip Porter in the “To the Reader” introduction of the Men’s Study Bible, and the Bible commentators make a point of advocating “humble service.” Bill McCartney talks about it aggressively, and Crawford Loritts asserts that “the body of Christ is arrogant, not broken.” On the other hand, the writings are fraught with assertions of male entitlement, and women are generally excluded from what at times sounds like an exclusive club.  

PK also expresses concerns about the importance of work and power. Writer Joseph Stowell says men should reject mainstream views that “real men grab for power, position, credentials,” and know that they should be “servants of God and others for God’s sake.” In contrast to workaholics who chase money, cars, and other material badges of significance, PK says that work is important, but that men should refuse to let their work run their lives or dictate their self-worth: “When we’re assured of our worth in God’s sight, we don’t have to let our work define our inner self. This frees us to be our best, and not worry about what we do.”

Above all, the Promise Keepers’ ideal man is characterized by “integrity” and by its necessary component of obedience to God. “A creed for life,” in fact, is “to be a man of integrity; to demonstrate that character; to live out a respectful obedience to God’s Word and model it to your children.” Integrity means that men will be able to resist the influence of Satan, in themselves and in their homes, and will be committed

---

to fostering "a regard and concern for the homes around us." Integrity means a man is assertive, independent, and decisive but respectful and self-controlled, waiting patiently for God to do his work, even in the face of frustration and anxiety. A man’s integrity means that people – wife, children, neighbors, colleagues, nation – will be willing to follow his example. It also means that men will use their authority wisely, since “power and greed, when unleashed, produce ugly results.” Citing Matt. 20:20-28, in which Jesus teaches about the need to serve, the Bible commentator tells men: “Examine how you deal with children, employees or anyone under your authority. Do you use your position to get what you want, or to help others get what they need?”

Real men, PK says, love Jesus, love their families and their brothers in Christ, and love themselves. They work to transcend racial misunderstanding and bias, since Christ wants all men to be allies, “to help each other along on the journey of life,” to help one another keep their promises. They are humble, open, and don’t condemn people whose efforts fail. They give time, attention, and loving touch. They should cultivate “real intimacy” with their wives, knowing that it is “not just a function of sex – it permeates our lives only when emotional, spiritual, and sexual faithfulness characterize our relationship with our spouses.”

---

90 McCartney, “It’s Time for Men to Take a Stand,” What Makes a Man, 12.
93 “Matt. 20:20-28: Greatness Comes by Serving,” Study Bible, 1074. See also p. 1288, where the commentators mark Gal. 2:6 – “God does not judge by external appearance.” Also, in Seven Promises 1999, McCartney, in “A Call to Unity,” 154, cites divisions among Christians “along racial and denominational lines,” and Glen Kehrein, “A White Perspective,” 182, discusses “the rationale of superiority” that “the white culture” has used in oppressing African Americans and Native Americans. “Racial reconciliation” is also one of the organization’s core commitments.
As servant leaders, men are responsible for the actions, attitudes, and financial, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of all in their family. A servant leader "must take responsibility for the dirty dishes, the vacuuming, the bills, the trash can, the bathrooms, and every other area of responsibility," one pastor writes. Servant leaders "place everyone in front of themselves in order to lead," and do not tell their families to do anything that they themselves would not do. A man must lead his family in Bible study and prayer and go with them to regular worship at a church—there must be no more leaving it to the wife. Such a man's "radical other-centeredness"—on top of his other traits as a man of integrity—is the capstone of a stability that gives his wife "the security to allow her husband to lead the family."95 "The ultimate mark of a man," say PK regulars and advice-book writers Gary Smalley and John Trent, "is that he is willing to 'stay put' when the odds aren't good, rather than turning and running from his wife and children when the times get tough and the cost is high." Leighton Ford adds, "Not only are our character and the future dependent on the keeping of promises, but God Himself is a promise keeper and you and I were made to be like Him."96

PK's iconography has tended to reinforce the message of heroism, rigor, and men's being responsible for the world. Its primary logo includes the words "Men of Integrity." Its logo for the 2001 rally season is the first logo I have seen that does not play off the male-as-savior motif; rather, it calls for an "extreme faith," playing off the popularity of "extreme" sports, and combines the words "turn the tide" with an illustration of a tsunami apparently ready to swamp a major city. (For 2002, the logo

---

is "Storm the Gates," with broken chains dangling off the final S and a caption, "This is not a drill.") The PK logo for the 2000 rally season incorporates the words "Go the Distance" and portrays three men – suggestive of the Trinity – two having climbed to the top, one cheering and the other reaching down to help the third do so. Its caption imitates a help-wanted ad, perhaps appealing for a (spiritual) breadwinner: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Expect resistance, worldly criticism, and possible persecution. Constant danger, with periods of darkness and isolation. Personal safety and financial security uncertain. Eternal rewards at journey's end." 97 Similarly, logos in 1994 and 1996 show three men holding up the globe; one logo includes a clock reading 11 p.m., a millennialist warning.98 The photograph in the cover design of the PK Men's Study Bible is a close-up of clean and shiny gear works – suggesting a manly interest in things mechanical, and the promise of an orderly world. The image is black-and-white for the King James Version; for the New International Version it is black and white with a sepia tint, a color combination typically used by graphic artists to signal the past or evoke nostalgia.

Men may be heroic or "extreme," but they can be so only through God and acknowledge that they can no longer be "'fix it myself' people." Submitting to God, welcoming his presence, allows him to work through men to overcome their innate rebelliousness, to reconcile to him and to other people. However, men must be open to this relationship with God – they must be willing to receive it in a continuous process of submission and self-emptying. PK says men are not to follow the example of many other evangelicals and decide for themselves "what is and is not truth." Rather, as

---

98 These logos are on the covers of Seven Promises 1994, and Go the Distance, 1996. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen observed the significance of the 1994 logo in "Servanthood or Soft Patriarchy?" 13.
Luis Palau says, they must look to God’s Word for his will: “In a world full of deceptive detours and confusing paths, let’s trust our heavenly Father and do exactly what He has said.”

Even in suffering – particularly in suffering – this is true, PK says. A Bible commentator draws on Job’s example, Job who demonstrates “an exercise of man’s faith in God’s love.” As Job showed, “We will never understand all God does. Our finite intellect must bow to God’s infinite understanding. Sin, at its base, involves believing and following our own understanding when it disagrees with God’s truth.” If we search and logic still is not satisfied, then “we must bow our heads at his feet, not shake our fists in his face.” This theme also appears in laymen’s writings. Says Crawford Loritts, “I take my hands off my life, and I say to Him, ‘No more telling You how to use me.’”

Not only absolute obedience but also brokenness is required of believers. Not man’s will but God’s must be done, PK says. One commentator in the Study Bible writes that “God can use hard times in our lives to bring us to a point of despair so we’ll turn to him” and that God uses personal crises as “wake-up calls.” Another commentator, Dr. Sid Buzzell, writes: “You can’t fake this one. The only way out of the darkness of a willful heart is to face this battle of the wills with Almighty God and fight until you lose it. He must win if you are ever going to be a total man, a real winner.” In surrender and submission, then, is victory – a radical departure from secular masculine ideals.

102 Dr. Sid Buzzell, “Jacob: The Battle With a Willful Man,” Study Bible, 35.
A man's "losing" to the Almighty might be less threatening or painful with the loving image of God that Promise Keepers employs and the fact that PK calls on men to become part of God's "family," which includes the Son and the Holy Spirit—all of whom are sexed male. This God is the father who welcomes home the son despite his sins, and in fact this God is the sort of father that some of the PK essayists say, or suggest, that they wish they had had. The first section in the PK Study Bible, "Man to Man: About Being a Son of God," draws upon images of the Prodigal Son, and feelings of isolation, insecurity, guilt, and grief, and then counters: "God's love is strong, fatherly and complete." This heavenly Father is ever-present, not distant; he is demanding yet loving, merciful, patient, and just. He will exert his ultimate authority over the disobedient, but also extend his infinite love to his children if they keep working to meet his standards. It's OK if a man stumbles as long as he "respond[s] positively to God's correction" and keeps his direction "heavenward," for God will forgive when people sin. Still, there are severe and eternal penalties for not surrendering to God: "eternal separation" from him. But all that men must do, at first, is surrender. They must be vulnerable, receptive, humble, with God. They must receive God; they can't accomplish, buy, or earn God.

103 PK shifted its emphasis to this image with the “prayer of commitment” in the introductory essays to Seven Promises 1999, xvii. The introductory prayer in the '94 edition was a more standard sinner's prayer (10), followed by a questionnaire asking men to describe their relationship with their father (11).

104 See the “Promise Keepers Statement of Faith,” Study Bible, xvi; and Wagner, “Biblical Unity and Biblical Truth,” Seven Promises 1999, 245. Referring to the Holy Spirit, Wagner writes, “He ... has come to fill us with power to live a godly life (Acts 1:8).”

105 A number came from a broken home or a home in which their parents’ marriage was troubled. Among them, Gordon Dalbey writes that God can be a “Father to the Fatherless,” the father that men never had (What Makes, 122). Gary Smalley recalls his parents’ marriage (“A Man and His Family,” Go the Distance, 121). McCartney's descriptions particularly in Chapter 5 of From Ashes to Glory (61-68) suggest his father—a former U.S. Marine drill sergeant and later an autoworker—was rigid and authoritarian.

106 For the Prodigal Son, see the Study Bible, xxi, xxii. On good efforts, see Dr. Gene Getz, “Abraham: A Man Who Answered God's Call,” Study Bible, 18. On eternal separation, see “Man to Man,” Study Bible, xxi. On surrender, see “Man to Man,” Study Bible, xxii.
Once a man lets God in, however, he should submit completely: “Worship in its truest sense means giving ourselves to God,” Wellington Boone says.\textsuperscript{107} Jack Hayford assures readers that if a man worships God properly, all things in his household will fall into place. On the whole, the writers say men are to present themselves to God with no restriction or reservation, even if not convenient, placing themselves entirely in his hands, giving him body, mind, emotions, spirit.\textsuperscript{108} They should do so in absolute trust and transparency of self.\textsuperscript{109} They must obey God, approaching him on his terms, not their own, and even forgive when they wish not to.\textsuperscript{110} They should make their obedience “immediate and complete.”\textsuperscript{111} They must eliminate pride, relinquish self-will, forget about the self.\textsuperscript{112} They must attend a specific church, setting the example for their families by taking them there and joining them in worship — every week. In worship, whether alone or with others, men should take a posture of supplication, surrender, and adoration — vessels waiting for the Holy Spirit, kneeling, perhaps with arms raised to heaven.\textsuperscript{113} When the Spirit prompts, men should follow it and do the right thing, even if they want to follow the temptation to do otherwise, such as to fight the person who calls them by a racial slur or to look at pornography: “You must make the right decision, and God will honor your action,” John Maxwell says. “The Holy Spirit will change the feeling as time passes.”\textsuperscript{114}

A godly man’s submission to more-earthly figures is evidently not a matter of consensus. How, and whether, he submits depends largely on the sex of the person to

\textsuperscript{111} “Matt: 2:13-25: Immediate Obedience,” Study Bible, 1049.  
\textsuperscript{113} Hayford, “Setting a Sure Foundation,” \textit{Seven Promises} 1999, 3-10.
whom he bends: other men, as pastors or in small-group settings, or women, as wives and perhaps pastors. PK tells men to gather and support one another in small groups, where they can hold one another accountable. These men should "submit to each other in reverence for Christ." Ideally, men bond not only to the group but also to another man, a "brother" or "mentor," to hold one another to actions such as daily prayer and leaving the office on time to join one's family. Since "the perverse nature of man tends to sloth, not diligence," and since, as Prov. 27:17 asserts, "one man sharpens another," such arrangements are a critical part of advancing God's plan, PK says. Accountability, it says, "puts teeth into commitment. And it forces you to open up an area of your life to scrutiny by another. ... In doing so, we are not as independent and self-sufficient." Gary Smalley, in the 1999 compilation, implicitly includes women in this submission equation. He encourages men to form small groups with their wives and three other like-minded Christian couples, and to seek their guidance as well. ¹¹⁵

But there is no such message involving female pastors, an issue among evangelicals particularly since World War II.¹¹⁶ Given that PK teaches men's "servant leadership" to female "followers," what are the implications for women's full expressions of spirituality in churches? The pastor issue may be changing – in 1997 the organization extended a verbal welcome to women pastors at its regional clergy conferences, and its Web site now includes a photograph of a woman, as well as

¹¹⁵ Wagner, "Strong Brotherly Relationships," Seven Promises 1999, 45. Also, Jerry White, "Commitment and Accountability," What Makes a Man, 143-145. White cites Prov. 27:17 and Eccles. 4:9-10. The Ecclesiastes passage says in part that "two are better than one..." Lyndi McCartney, as we will see in Chapter 4, builds on this, picking up the rest of the verse: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Smalley's observations are in "Five Secrets of a Happy Marriage," Seven Promises 1999, 95 (hereafter cited as "Five Secrets"). This essay is also in the 1994 edition; a somewhat different approach is in "A Man and His Family," Go the Distance, 119-135.
¹¹⁶ Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 11.
photos of three men, on a page inviting “all pastors” to a special conference in February 2003. Still, the issue of female religious authority has been a silent theme throughout the PK writings. PK tells men to honor and support their pastors, but the writings always refer to pastors as male. The explicit “feminization” rhetoric of PK’s earlier writings suggested certainly a desire to increase the presence of men and a “men’s style” in the churches, if not opposition to women’s ordination and any notions of obedience to and full support for women pastors. Although the writers later toned down the “feminization” rhetoric, there remained the suggestion of emasculation. For instance, in the 1992 compilation, Robert Hicks, one guru of the mythopoetic movement of the 1980s and early ’90s, writes that he is “amused” by the debate about women’s ordination, since women “exercise tremendous power in all churches by sheer numerical strength.” That “feminization,” as he calls it, shows in the controlled, refined, “flowery” atmosphere of services. Services need, rather, to allow men to be vocal, emotional, involved, celebrating. But as it is, in church

a man can’t be himself; he has to watch what he says, act appropriately, and wear a neatly pressed and coordinated shirt and tie. ... We’re all dressed the way our mommies always wanted us to dress. We’re all nice, clean little boys, sitting quietly so we won’t get into trouble with our mothers!

To Hicks, “mommies” and “mothers” are domineering, castrating females: they rob boys and men of their natural maleness. Men and boys, in his view, must assert themselves, separate from their mothers, and hew instead to “real men,” and be – or become – the men they really are. In the 1994 Seven Promises, Tony Evans, George

---


118 Robert Hicks, “Why Men Feel so Out of Place at Church,” What Makes a Man, 154-56. Hicks’ works were not included in the later volumes.
W. Bush’s friend, blames “the feminization of the American male” – men becoming “sissified” and “abdicating” their roles as “spiritually pure leaders” – for the “national crises” of family disintegration and “abuse,” of teen pregnancy and boys’ promiscuity, of the high rates of young black men in prisons, and of children in gangs. Evans argues that when fathers began sending their children to church, rather than taking them, women had to take over. “In the black community, for example, women run the show to an alarming degree”: They head more than half the families and are most of the schoolteachers and church authority figures. This “exaggerated imbalance” must be fixed now, he says: Men should “reclaim their manhood.” They should take back their family leadership, and women should willingly give it back – gradually, if they must, to protect themselves. And, Evans says, men need a movement to liberate themselves from the dominant culture’s “distorted” and unbiblical images of manhood, which place sex, clothing, cars, and career ahead of God, family, children, respectfulness, justice, stability, mercy, and wisdom. As his prime example of a man’s spiritual commitment, Evans uses the figure of Job, who “understood that a father is to be the priest of his home and maintain that continuity of commitment between generations by setting a godly example.” Also, H.B. London Jr. criticizes the “feminization” of the churches but advocates “equality of leadership” between women and men. He does not say what leadership role women should have, but his comments suggest that he is talking about church leadership in terms of boards, not at the pastor level. 119

In the 1999 Seven Promises, the tone shifts somewhat from blatant claims of “feminization.” Evans’ essay, for one, is not included. E. Glenn Wagner asserts that

the church has allowed its differences to divide it and thus has lost its glory and its "saltiness," without saying exactly how the differences arose. He says churches must foster friendly, significant, mentoring relations among men. Wellington Boone claims that the church is "aimless" mostly because people lack faith in God, because "men of God," being unwilling to give themselves completely to God, are "seemingly helpless to bring about change." Boone cites "the futility of American Christian men over the past thirty or so years," as they have tried, like Zion in the book of Isaiah, to give birth to revival. He blames lazy prayer habits and proud, self-involved, and sexually immoral pastors. Other writers emphasize the need to support overburdened pastors, who are always referred to as male.120

The messages about how men should relate to their wives are more mixed, depending on the writer and the year of publication. As usual, the Bible commentators' words are more moderate. They emphasize, of course, Jesus' absolute obedience to the Father, and the apostle Peter's submission and service in the face of persecution:

Believers should submit for the Lord's sake to those in government and to those who personally have authority over them (1 Peter 2:13-20). This attitude of submission to God's purposes is best illustrated in Christ's undeserved suffering (2:21-25). Peter extends this theme of submission to the marital relationship (3:1-7) and to the pursuit of harmonious relationships with others (3:8-12).121

The commentators also explicitly warn men against viewing submission as a one-way arrangement. Paul, they say, included men in the mandate for marital submission:

He said, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." The commentators also place "service" in the context of "the lowliest of tasks." As Jesus washed the feet of his disciples ("the master became a servant, the CEO became a gopher"), so should men serve, doing "the job nobody wants": "We should serve our wives, children, coworkers, bosses, friends and even enemies. Take a few minutes and identify some jobs or chores that you don't normally perform and volunteer to do them." 122

The essayists in the popular books speak not so much of men's obedience or submission to wives but of men's leading or serving their wives. Even then, most of the advocacy of service - let alone servant leadership - does not develop until the 1999 collection. In the 1992 and 1994 books, men write of leading families - except for one essay about what elements make for "a happy marriage," where Gary Smalley takes a more mutual approach.

In the 1992 volume, Udo Middelman, who wrote the servanthood essay - "Let Men Be Servants" - asserts that all men are called by God to be servants, but that this servanthood is not like a house servant's: It is not "blind obedience" and does not signify an empty life. First Middelman describes how Jesus was a servant, a servant who "knew the problems and the solution" and who "managed to accomplish his task." Middelman then outlines the servanthood of ordinary humans:

Real servants are people with knowledge and skill. They serve by doing what few others can accomplish. ... Servants are not ashamed, but proud of their ability. They see the need to teach, to tell, to show what is true, efficient, just, and good. They step in because they have seen the right way and want to limit the painful results of the merely personal way of others. In a fallen world of insufficiency, of pain, of death itself, servants cut right to the core of the

quoting McCartney on 126 and 133 as saying, "We're going to start to lift up our pastor. ... We're going to build this man up," and Jesse Miranda, "'Church' Means 'People,'" 136, 137.

122 "1 Peter: At a Glance," Study Bible, 1381. On Jesus' obedience, Phil. 2:8.
problem with workable solutions. ... We serve through superior ability in all areas, not through false self-denial, guilt, and humility that deny God’s calling to be man made in His image and engaged in His battles ... to win, like Jesus, not to submit.123

Middelman, in praising the pride and “superior ability” of “real servants,” challenges PK’s admonition that servants be humble. As well, while PK would oppose any submission to evil, Middelman’s tone suggests a more disparaging view of male submission, and an emphasis on dominance.

Also in the 1992 volume, Gary Smalley and John Trent assert that men are natural leaders and that women perhaps can be leaders, but must learn how to be. Specifically, Smalley and Trent say that men’s innately strong characteristics have been skewed by society but can be fixed by proper guidance. Jesus Christ, they say, embodied a “biblical manhood” that consists of five components that “can be learned by a woman” but have “an ever-present nature in all of us as men.” Men have a “natural assertiveness” — not abused as either passivity or anger, and held in check by “self-control over emotions, appetites, and actions”; they have a healthy independence — rather than the “people-pleasing” “co-dependence” that “used to be a particularly feminine ailment” but is “growing rapidly” among men; and they have self-confidence that comes from credibility” — from having courage to consistently tell the truth. (All of these combine to give a man strength to create the fifth trait, stability. A Christlike man inspires the confidence and loyalty of his family. A man’s “healthy self-confidence” earns his wife’s respect, and his self-confidence “transfers” to her and “gives her the security to allow her husband to lead the family.”) With some writers,

like Bill McCartney, the suggestion is that they want to serve because service entails the Father's reward. McCartney writes, in 1992, 1994, and 1999, that he wants nothing more “than to serve Jesus Christ, because I want Almighty God's favor upon me.” 124

In the 1994 Seven Promises, a number of essays speak to men's spiritual leadership. Those by Jack Hayford, Wellington Boone, Tony Evans, and James Dobson focus on family leadership, though a fifth explicitly emphasizes male authority. Hayford writes of “a teary-eyed blonde,” a “sweet and lovely wife who had come to my office for counsel”; her marriage was in trouble because her husband had “no pattern whatsoever” for worshiping God – and such a disciplined commitment is what sets “a sure foundation” for marriage and family life, as well as all a man's relationships, his work, and his business practices. Boone says personal and national revival start “when men fall on their knees and cry out to God.” Evans urges men to “reclaim” the leadership of the family. “If your husband tells you he wants to reclaim his role, let him! God never meant for you to bear the load you're carrying.” Evans says men need to change their schedules – watch television and work out less, and talk with their wives and families more. And Dobson argues that fathers have “abdicated their responsibilities for leadership and influence in the lives of their children.” The fifth writer, Edwin Louis Cole, emphasizes the importance of obedience when he writes, “Men familiar with the standard of God's Word know the sins of their countries, how people have mistreated one another and rebelled against constituted authority in cities and homes.” He criticizes lax justice, lack of truth in communist

---

nations and in America and, with abortion, the destruction of “what God ordained to be in His image.”

In the 1996 collection, *Go the Distance*, Gary Smalley asserts that, as 1 Peter 3:17 says, a wife is to be honored as the “weaker partner,” with the husband as “the coach”:

To honor your wife is to treat her as the Most Valuable Player on the team, applauding and appreciating her efforts like the star quarterback; she is capable of calling the plays without ‘coaching’ from you. You encourage her and listen to her viewpoint and ideas. To honor your mate, in football terminology, also means protecting her the way an offensive lineman protects the quarterback.

Smalley’s interpretation posits women’s “weakness” and men’s dominance and leadership as God’s norm – in other words, he naturalizes male dominance. By asserting that women need men’s protection, he also lends God’s imprimatur to the idea that men know what’s best for women. In addition, his tone is patronizing, though perhaps he simply is using scenarios that he thinks unaware men can understand.

In the 1999 *Seven Promises*, the tone of male superiority is lessened somewhat. Evans’ essay on the “feminization of the American male” is replaced by Ken Davis’ “The Servant Who Leads.” Davis emphasizes service through words, actions, and giving of time and attention. Men today, he says, “don’t like to serve”; they “want to be served.” However, his essay contains what may be a hint that the purpose of service is gain at some level, or a man’s knowing he won’t be humbled, or

---

both. Davis cites John 13, in which Jesus, after the Last Supper, "with all of His authority, with all of His power ... began to wash their feet":

The challenge to be a leader in our home is not a ticket to abuse our authority as head of the household, but instead we must understand that our wives and our children are not our possessions. They are not extensions of our egos. They are beloved children of God who will be blessed and influenced beyond our imagination, who will have their minds and hearts blown away by our willingness to serve them. Leadership and authority are not weapons to be wielded; they are trusts to be administered.

Men, he writes, "serve because they want to ... because they know that taking on the attitude of a servant does not diminish their authority."127 Joseph Stowell moderates this concept of service: "The highest end of a man of God is not his power or his position or his profile or his prosperity, but it is that he be a servant of God and a servant of others for God's sake," whether in career, money, or marriage. Max Lucado, too, asserts, "We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service."128

In another essay, Wellington Boone calls for men to revamp their prayer lives so that the life of their families and the nation may be transformed: "Our prayer and study lives should have an immediate, ongoing effect on our families. They should be so moved by our love and mercy that they want to emulate what they see in us of the character and qualities of Christ." If men believe in the Resurrection and the power

---

of prayer, he says, "we will become the source of faith, hope, and vision that the world so desperately needs." 129

In February 2000, PK also endorsed further rhetoric of men as savior when it posted on its Web site a transcript of remarks from the national rally of October 1997, labeling it a "news release" and titling it "Declaration on the Family."130 Speaker Dan Juster's comments suggested the theme of men as linchpins of an orderly world: "We men have sinned grievously and caused terrible pain. Some have divorced the wives of our youth, some have left families and become deadbeat dads, releasing terrible destruction that is repeated in cycles of abandonment."

Tony Evans said: "We are to confess our failure of abusing our wives, ignoring our children, stifling their growth, and, yes, not treating them as equals; equal partners; 'joint heirs,' 1st Peter says, 'of the grace of life.' ” He asserted the need for men's spiritual leadership, not with "despotism and dominance" but with "submission and mutual honor and respect and care and love dominat[ing] the atmosphere.” Men, he said, are responsible for creating an atmosphere that fosters their families' growth. Echoing his 1994 essay, he said men must “reclaim” their “biblical leadership” — without apology or asking for permission, since “you don't get permission to do what God commands you to do.” Men must, however, ask their families' forgiveness for their neglect and abuse, he said. To Evans, biblical leadership does not mean “forcing women and oppressing women, and misusing women. Biblical leadership means

129 Boone, “Why Men Must Pray,” 17. His references to “mercy” are in the context of God’s mercy to doubters and the need for people to forgive those who have wronged them.

130 PK posted it as a news release, but there was no news: The “Declaration” was a transcript of five speakers’ comments at the rally more than four months before. Several speakers – Bruce Fong, Isaac Canales, Joseph Garlington, Tony Evans – condemned “abuse” – including “battery,” emotional and financial neglect and abandonment, and “abuse of the unborn, the ultimate abuse.” The nature of the "battery" is not clear but may reflect churches' gradual acknowledgement of, and opposition to, domestic violence. The document, at www.promisekeepers.com/paff/news/paffnews24.html, is no longer on the site.
when you come home, you come home to your second job,” not to the newspaper or the TV, but to help with the dishes, to get the children ready for bed.

Then you get on your knees, beside the bed, you and your wife, and you dedicate your children to God. Biblical leadership means that your wife is not stifled, she grows, and blossoms, and flourishes, and she becomes significant because you loved her, and supported her, and encouraged her, and helped her, and affirmed her, and strengthened her, and dedicated her. It means you lay your hands on each one of those children, and on that wife, and bless them in the name of God. That’s spiritual leadership. 131

Evans’ assertion that a woman “becomes significant” because her husband makes her so appears to varying degrees in others’ writings, including Bill McCartney’s, whose claims are the subject of Chapter 4. Some writers do appear to refer to the security that a person would reasonably expect to result from a partner’s encouragement and keeping his part of the marital commitment. Gary Smalley discusses the necessity of honoring each member of the family – that is, determining that each is “highly valuable” and, with God’s power, being able to “love others genuinely and consistently.” He says, “You can do that by first honoring God, then building security into your wife and children by verbally praising them and protecting them.” (He does not repeat his 1996 analogy of wives and MVPs.) 132

This chapter has shown that, as typically happens in PK writings, the Bible commentators use a more moderate tone than do the writers in the lay publications, and that there are evident differences of opinion about whether a man should “submit” to his wife. When PK advocates men’s submission to wives, it does so in its

---

131 Though Evans has been controversial, he remained a speaker at PK events into 2001. See the 2001 schedule at www.promisekeepers.org/2001/2001115.htm (12 May 2001).
Bible commentaries, and there, rarely. The question, of course, is what this apparent aversion means.

Consider the implications of the word “submission” itself. For a woman, submission connotes yielding, following, obeying. For a man, it may connote being dominated, weak, effeminate, emasculated, even homosexual – as is suggested in PK rhetoric by Middelman’s admonition “to win, not to submit,” by Hicks’ contemptuous “mommies” imagery, and by Evans’ “sissified men” comment. How much can a manly man submit? As much as PK insists that a godly man repudiates secular standards, its masculine ideal very much reflects and echoes them – especially in its commitment to male dominance and its aversion to homosexuality, both emphasized with a rhetorical toughness against “sissies,” “feminization,” and “sinning” of homosexuals, as well as the sports context of its rallies and the claim that men are natural leaders. It is perhaps partly for these reasons that PK advocates male “submission” in very safe forms, and prefers the words “serve” and “lead” where “submission” is not safe – where a man would relinquish significant authority to a woman. This semantic setup creates a hierarchy that prevents a masculine man from having to be on the bottom in a power relationship.

For the most part, even when a man does submit, he does so to (male) figures who have his best interests at heart. First, he submits to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (whose love is guaranteed, whose punishments may hurt but are to the good, and who promise eternal rewards for submission). Then a man submits to a pastor and to a support group of like-minded men – who, even if the group includes a gay man, use God’s Word as the standard. When a man reaches the level of wife and family, he serves – and then he does so because, as Ken Davis writes, he wants to, because it does not diminish his authority. Or, alternatively, the man leads – and in
PK’s universe of the family, the man leads and all others become followers. As leaders, especially as servant leaders or spiritual leaders, the man is accorded the ultimate earthly power: He is to guard Truth, and he is given this role by the ultimate authority, God’s Word.

This hierarchy of God/Jesus/Holy Spirit, pastor, men’s support group, and then wife/family allows men to maintain the conviction – or the illusion – that they are superior and powerful, even if women in their congregations challenge them or if the larger society disputes their power because of the men’s class status, lack of autonomy in a downsizing workplace, or their devout Christianity, emotionality, and physical, non-sport, contact with other men. Wifely submission reinforces this male entitlement, even if the submission in practice often amounts to a wink and a nod, as some studies suggest. A man’s “headship” also can be a badge of respectability, not only because he preserves authority but also because it signals that he can keep his family in order.

This chapter, by examining PK writers’ rhetoric of servant leadership and submission, has demonstrated the writers’ concern with male power over women or over “the feminine” – in addition to their commitment to men’s moral obligation to serve God, family, and society. The chapter also has shown how PK’s mandate of humility is a concept with which many of these writers and speakers may struggle. It may be tempting to dismiss Promise Keepers’ rhetoric as reflecting illusions of power that mean little in practice. But PK’s images of women and Lyndi McCartney’s experiences are cautions against dismissing the significance of the rhetoric, as the next two chapters will show. Though the lay writers and biblical interpreters appear to diverge on whether a man should “submit” to his wife, Chapter 3 shows one area in which the secular writers and the Bible commentators signal agreement: that women,
innately weak, require male leadership and protection. The chapter examines how PK
portrays women in the Bible and in its most recent, moderate text, and the gist of
PK's definition of the ideal, godly woman.
CHAPTER III

IMAGES: COOPERATIVE CHILDREN, DEPENDENT WOMEN

Previous chapters have addressed how PK portrays men’s transgressions, its view that patriarchy is the appropriate social order, and its prescriptions for a godly man’s obedience and leadership. This chapter examines images of women’s and children's behaviors and abilities, and finds that PK portrays people in a way that supports its view of the appropriate order: Men’s absence is risky, disempowering, or catastrophic to women and children, and men’s godliness will cause the world to fall into place behind their right actions. PK suggests that “woman” is the Other who requires not just leadership but spiritual leadership, and that a man is a woman’s strength, her gateway to the sacred and to salvation. Even the most recent and moderate core texts of the ministry – the Study Bible (1997) and the 1999 Seven Promises essay collection – portray women in ways that emphasize their dependence on men. The writers signal that women – even “good” women – are innately like Eve: weak, susceptible to being led astray, needing the guidance and protection of men. “Bad” women in particular threaten men’s virtue.

In terms of children, PK’s images generally are shallow, not reflecting the difficult and knotty problems that a father’s “godliness” and love may not be able to solve. Earlier writings contain a few comments suggesting the difficulties of child-rearing – such as a teenager’s unspecified behavior prompting her father to wish she would “pack up and leave home,” in Leighton Ford’s words, and Tony Evans’ comments about young people, promiscuity, and jails. But the 1999 volume shows
teenage difficulty in mild terms, such as the son's pierced ear – the result of swim
team peer pressure – that comes as quite a surprise to his parents. (To the great relief
of the anxious wife, the father maintains self-control, asks what was behind the son's
decision, and affirms his love for him.)\textsuperscript{133} The problems that most PK writers consider
range from the “minor disappointments” of not making an athletic team, to poor
grades or breaking up with a friend, to “a long-term family illness” or “a job change
that forces the family to move across the country” (two categories that address
situations, not behavioral problems resulting from them).\textsuperscript{134} These stories convey
that, for example, teenagers are not recalcitrant, and they don't drink, don't use
drugs, don't have sex.\textsuperscript{135}

But perhaps the most important images are those of women. To some degree,
children can be expected to have to bow to their parents' authority. Such an
expectation for a wife to her husband – however softly framed – is more problematic,
and perhaps more contested.

Neither the Study Bible nor the 1999 \textit{Seven Promises} makes an overt point of
female submission to male authority or leadership. Rather, the writers state the
message in more subtle ways. In the character profiles of four biblical women whose
behavior is portrayed as exemplary, the Study Bible emphasizes their obedience to
God despite adversity. \textit{Seven Promises}, which like the Study Bible portrays women
almost exclusively as wives or as mothers, emphasizes that although women may
have faith, they typically lack agency, smarts, and strength. Their interests and

\textsuperscript{135} Bill McCartney's second memoir, \textit{Sold Out: Becoming Man Enough to Make a Difference}, is a relatively frank
departure from this approach. It addresses deeper crises, such as teen-age daughter Kristy’s unplanned, out-of-wedlock
pregnancy by a player on his football team. It was her first; her second, after \textit{Sold Out} was published, was with another
player.
activities generally are stereotypical. They need nurturing and reassurance – for example, requiring their husbands' interest in their clothing purchases and soothing at the thought of leaving a 17-year-old son at home alone during his parents' weekend trip (“who's going to cut the watermelon for him at six in the morning?”).¹³⁶

The Study Bible presents one- to two-page character profiles of 42 men and 4 women, written by Dr. Gene A. Getz and Dr. Sid Buzzell. Two of the women, Naomi and Abigail, are Old Testament figures; Mary and Priscilla were in Jesus' time. The Study Bible does not profile Eve but does devote a full profile to her partner in crime, Adam. Eve's disobedience is addressed in the context of Adam's and in a box titled “The Fall.”

The commentators' discussion of Eve's disobedience in the Garden is no new interpretation, but as the foundation for how many PK writers seem to view women, it bears repeating. The writers say Satan decided to ambush Adam and Eve, “the prize of God’s creation,” through Eve; they focus especially on her use of her intellect.

Satan's attack began with planting doubts about understanding or interpreting God's words, moved to theological debate about what God really meant, and finally focused those doubts on God's character. ... In Eve's mind, it made sense that what God forbade was, in fact, desirable. The fruit was good for food (practical and functional); pleasing to the eye (aesthetically desirable) and a source of wisdom (intellectually beneficial). Eve concluded that not only was it not bad to do what God had prohibited, it was actually good.¹³⁷

When challenged by God after she ate of the apple, she joined Adam's “blame game,” not taking responsibility for her own choices.

¹³⁶ Smalley, “Five Secrets,” 94.
¹³⁷ “The Fall,” Study Bible, 6.
PK's discussion also can be read as a subtle blaming of Eve— and all women after her— for being a wedge between men and their Father, and perhaps their earthly fathers. This idea emerges in the Study Bible's introductory essay, which details the necessity of the father-son bond: “A man's relationship with his father is basic.” Though PK notes that it was Adam's choice to follow Eve in disobedience, it still was Eve who introduced the idea of disobedience—a sin that built “a wall of separation” from God.¹³⁸ Perhaps it is woman who will continue to be that wedge between men and their Father, if men let her.

Eve's counterpart, in what PK calls the “new creation,” certainly must be Mary. (Recall from Chapter 1 that Jesus is the “second Adam”; similarly, Mary would be the foil to Eve.) Mary is introduced with the headline, “Mary: She Knew What to Treasure.” She is praised for her obedience to God, who appears to her as the Holy Spirit telling her that she will become miraculously pregnant with the hope of the world—all this, no matter how “obscure and powerless” she was in the eyes of society. Mary “submitted to God’s will without regard for how it would affect her personally,” “completely and without hesitation.” She had absolute faith in God and treasured the words of the Spirit and the events that led to Jesus' birth.¹³⁹

Naomi (who experienced “God’s Bitter Hand”) exemplifies patient suffering, without bitterness, Buzzell writes: “Naomi took inventory of her life and faced into her storm with clear reality. She was honest about her difficulty without making life difficult for those around her. No vindictiveness. No reproachfulness.” It is this, and Naomi's determination to trust God in bitter times, that persuade Ruth to be loyal to

¹³⁸ Getz, “Blame Game,” Study Bible, 7. The discussion of the importance of the father, and of the “wall of separation,” are in “Man to Man,” Study Bible, xxi-xxii.
¹³⁹ Dr. Sid Buzzell, “Mary: She Knew What to Treasure,” Study Bible, 1118-19. It is unclear how Buzzell determines that Mary was 14 at the time. Scripture does not give her age.
her and follow her into alien and unwelcoming territory. Still, it is a man named Boaz who protects Naomi financially and eventually marries her, becoming her legal “kinsman-redeemer.” The third woman profiled is Abigail (“Beauty, Intelligence, Sensitivity, Reward”). Abigail, according to Getz, is courageous, “wise, discerning, generous.” She balances the dangerous surliness of her husband, Nabal, and by her initiative she averts a certain massacre of Nabal and all his associates by David, whose friendly overtures and name Nabal has repeatedly insulted. Without consulting Nabal – who would likely order her to do otherwise – Abigail takes vast amounts of food to David, falls at his feet, and takes the blame for Nabal’s actions, accurately describing his failures. She also reminds David of “God’s call on his life.” Shortly after, her husband dies, and David asks Abigail to marry him. The Bible commentator attributes David’s action to his being struck by her godly example, though the Scripture itself does not say that. Interestingly, the commentator here gives tacit approval to Abigail’s acting independently of her husband; since he is ungodly, it seems she is not bound to follow his evil ways. Last in the profiles is Priscilla, wife of Aquila. They are introduced with the headline “Aquila and Priscilla: Teamwork in Ministry.” Priscilla, like Aquila, is noted for being “incredibly loyal” to Paul and to Jesus, having helped Paul preach and “disciple new believers” and having risked her life for Paul and for Christianity. Getz deems her and Aquila an example of how men can work with their wives as a “ministry team.”

It is notable that PK asks men to learn from women’s good example. Its doing so suggests that the ministry does not frown on women’s teaching men in some fashion. But each also is presented by the commentators as in some way dependent on

---

a man. The character profiles do not highlight women who act in a scenario that involves neither male approval nor male reward – for example, Deborah and Esther, two Old Testament figures. It is also possible that the writers view Esther’s and Abigail’s acting against their husbands as examples of what happens when a man does not act in a godly manner.

Deborah is portrayed as a wise and godly leader, and Esther is deemed courageous even at risk of death. These are their stories as the commentators interpret them, each in a two- or three-paragraph in-text box with no author named. Deborah is a “prophetess, the wife of Lappidah” – the commentators’ only reference to her husband. Deborah ruled the nation of Israel for four decades as a judge who held court under “the palm of Deborah.” As judge, she “settled disputes and gave direction to the people,” showing “leadership practices that are very valuable for our study today”: She “listened to God” when the rest of the nation did not; she “declared God’s word to others, ... led with tenderness and compassion, ... (and) encouraged others to serve God.” The commentators say it is now common for women “to hold positions of authority and leadership in business, government, education and all other sectors of society,” but the writers do not include the family in this list. Also, the writers praise Deborah for her “leadership practices,” not her leadership qualities, a phrasing consistent with PK’s essentialist assertions that only men are innately leaders.141 Esther was the Old Testament Jewish woman who married the Persian king Xerxes and whose acts saved the Jewish people from decimation at the hands of one of his princes. The commentators do not note that Esther disobeyed her husband to make this happen, though they do say she “put her life on the line for her people,” risking execution by approaching him without having been invited. PK cites Esther’s
agreement to fast with other Jews as an example for Promise 2, which addresses the need for men to unite and support one another.\textsuperscript{142}

In contrast to the Bible commentaries, the discussions of women in the most recent, secular PK text take a more negative, and often stereotypical, tone. The 1999 \textit{Seven Promises} continues the portrayal of women as dependent, but it adds weakness and ignorance to Eve’s untrustworthiness. In many essays, women are portrayed as passive, reactionary, weak, or clinging. One essay describes a full-time mom who must find a paying job because of her husband’s disability. Another describes a woman who anxiously awaits her husband’s return home from work and his reaction to their son’s new earring (she relaxes as soon as the husband shows concern but not anger), and in another scenario it describes how she relaxes when he understands her fears, rather than criticizing them.\textsuperscript{143} In others, writers describe frustrated wives “desperate for a romantic moment” and whose husbands don’t share the chores; the stereotypical wife who wants her husband to appreciate her clothing purchases; the wife who must have her husband’s nurturing though he himself has had a long, tiring day at work; and the wife who merely “goes wild” in the face of her husband’s “passivity” and “retreat.”\textsuperscript{144}

Elsewhere, women are in tears. One is a “teary-eyed blonde” whose husband had “no pattern for worshiping God,” another is divorced by a man who left her for “a younger plaything,” and the third is a “precious lamb” who has mental impairments

\textsuperscript{141} “Judges 4:1-16: Deborah: Breaking New Ground,” Study Bible, 256.
\textsuperscript{142} “Esther 4:12-16: Laying It on the Line,” Study Bible, 540.
\textsuperscript{143} The woman forced to take a paying job is in “In the Life of One Man,” 28; the anxious wife and mother is in Smalley, “Five Secrets,” 90 and 94.
and who weeps because she misses her father. Each of these last three essays is a first-person account in which the writer, a man, rescues the woman in distress.145

Women also are portrayed in ways signaling that they cannot teach boys to be men and fathers, and perhaps are wrongly the confidants of men, since it is brothers who help to make men strong and accountable.146 And in two essays that focus on the need for men to understand men of different ethnic backgrounds, women are the well-intentioned but ignorant people who ask men of color embarrassing questions about their ethnicity.147 In five essays, women love the Lord and embody faith but are never pastors.148 However, one essay does portray women as leaders: a piece by a Native American writer, Huron Claus, who says a woman may be a “clan mother” who may have a role “just as important” in tribal decision-making as the chief's.149

Separately, another Native American writer, Don Bartlette, describes women in strongly respectful and admiring terms as people who loved him despite his facial deformities at birth: his mother, his grandmother, the white Christian woman who told him about Christ, and the white woman whom he eventually married.150

On the whole, these sorts of women are “good,” if not particularly strong151: They are women who seek to hear and obey the will of God. As “good” women, they are

---

146 On boys learning to be men: Hendricks, “A Mandate for Mentoring,” 34. On the way that men favor emotional intimacy with women, E. Glenn Wagner, “Strong Brotherly Relationships,” 42. Perhaps because the PK writers portray women as possible temptresses, or perhaps because of PK’s contempt for “feminization,” PK never, in the 1999 collection or in the other essay collections, refers to women as appropriately the friends of men. Bible commentators do mention the importance of friendship to romance: See “Song of Songs 5:16: Lovers and Friends,” 729.
150 Bartlette, “In Search of the Good Samaritan,” 211.
151 This division of women into “good” and “bad” has historically been a tool for discrimination against, and abuse of, the women defined as “bad,” as well as a means to control behavior of women who want – or need, for safety – to be deemed “good” or “respectable” – or, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to be diagnosed as emotionally “healthy.” For
cooperative, pliant, loyal, heterosexual, and chaste. They are rarely independent, and they neither abort nor divorce; nor do they resist a husband's efforts to become the spiritual leader in the home. None of the women is a pastor.152

The 1999 essays also juxtapose "good" and "bad" women, directly and indirectly, with sexuality being a prominent theme. In one essay, one woman, a true believer, is quoted as reporting an encounter with another who was fasting for "the church of Satan."153 Three essays refer to women as moral checks on a man's behavior. In one, a woman appears out of nowhere and orders the narrator not to lunge at a man who has called him a racist slur, but instead to approach him and shake his hand. In another, the writer says wives and children have a way of keeping a man's focus on the important things. In the third, the writer's wife has a sixth sense that helps him avoid sexual temptation by alerting him to risky women.154 (This last example may suggest that women are sexually tuned in to temptation or are themselves potential temptresses, which surpasses the good woman/bad woman dichotomy and enters the realm of "it takes one to know one," a genetic trait of failing or potential failing. A woman is innately a threat to men because of her sexual allure.155) Women in four essays are victims of men's sexual infidelity or men's addiction to pornography. 156 If these women are victims, then other women are "bad"

historical perspectives, see Kathleen M. Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia, especially her discussions of men's predation of women alone (276-77), and women's gossip as social control (94-100). See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's discussion of the uses of "respectability" for black Baptist women in the nineteenth century, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, 14-15.

152 Perhaps PK has not portrayed women as single because its first decade was focused on married men; only late in the 1990s did it begin to expand its outreach in a more focused way to single men and boys.
155 In an early text — What Makes a Man (1992) — Smalley and Trent assert that men's assaults on women, presumably including rape, are simply a result of men's unwillingness to control their natural assertiveness. In this essentialist thinking is a parallel: women will be whores if they lack self-control. See "The Promises You Make to Yourself," 42.
156 "In the Life of One Man," xix; Dobson, "The Priority of Fathering," 111; "In the Life of One Man," 51; "In the Life of One Man," 120.
ones who have aided the men’s fall by their physical presence or their presence in
pornographic magazines or films, or at strip clubs. Potiphar’s wife, who seeks to
seduce the Old Testament Joseph, is cited in a fifth essay, which discusses what men
should do when tempted: Run! To be safe, men, when traveling, should never dine
with women; nor should they ever counsel women alone.157 In a sixth essay,
adolescent girls are “victims” of gang members’ “sexual conquests,” and in one last
piece, “the woman at the well,” who had had five husbands and – when Jesus met her
– was consorting with a sixth man, is mentioned.158

In the Study Bible (1997) and in the 1999 Seven Promises, then, PK deploys a
basic imagery of women and a central message that are little different from those
conveyed in the movement’s earlier texts. The early texts, as the Chapter 2 discussion
showed, referred derisively to “mommies” and “feminized” churches and “sissified”
men, suggesting that men had allowed women to take power that God meant for men.
The later texts continue the theme of female weakness and untrustworthiness, and a
message of “feminization,” without ever uttering words that could be construed as an
explicit attack on females or female power.

Moreover, as PK says, “the perfect woman” is bone of man’s bones, flesh of his
flesh, a suitable helper.159 Her identity and emotional stability come from her
husband. A woman may not be able to assess for herself the meaning of God’s Word
for her, either because she is untrustworthy, like Eve, or weak. She needs a man to
lead her, to love her, to protect her, especially from herself and her own weaknesses,
and to make sure she learns biblical values. (Because she is also anxious and

Understand,” 164. For Jesus’ description of the woman, see John 4:17-18.
159 Getz, “Blame Game,” Study Bible, 7.
insecure, she may need an extra boost from Christian self-help books or a counselor.) If she is to lead, she must be taught how, and in God's approved order, she cannot lead a family. If she does, disaster will follow, since a woman cannot teach men and boys how to be real men. But women are forced to act against their husbands' authority because the men have forced them to. Although there are a few exceptions in PK's portrayals, these images of weakness predominate.

This chapter shows, then, that the Promise Keepers theology attributes the favored traits in its male-female, interdependent and complementary dualism to men, and the leavings to women. The perfect woman is not ultimately independent of a male in any fashion — to be so would make her a stray outside God's order. An "Other" woman is abnormal; she is self-made, a woman for whom a male is an unnecessary part. An observation by Plaskow holds true: Women "in male texts ... are not the subjects and molders of their own experiences but the objects of male purposes, designs, and desires. Women do not name reality, but rather are named as part of a reality that is male-constructed." Although Promise Keepers may use its portrayals of godly women to highlight behaviors and attitudes that men should also embody — and should celebrate in their wives — the ministry also uses those portrayals to provide men with an example that they can internalize, and teach their wives, daughters, and sons. Girls might be taught to view themselves and other females as victims or as possessing an evil and ungodly sexual nature; boys might learn to view girls not only with suspicion but also as lesser beings who deserve condescension and

---

160 For a discussion of Christianity's "dualistic and hierarchical mentality," see Christ and Plaskow's introduction to Womanspirit Rising, 5. For how dominant men appropriate "higher" traits and accord "lower" ones to women, see, in that volume, Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective," 44.
161 Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 3.
require rescue. The delivery of such messages by an authority figure like a parent can give them considerable weight and squelch a child’s own sense of truth.

As the next chapter shows, risks such as these were real for Lyndi McCartney, who was taught “proper” ways to be female while growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. But her story also complicates the Promise Keepers’ portrayals of weakness and dependency – suggesting, perhaps, that men like her husband have much to learn about their own prerogatives and biases. She asserts a certain independence from him, articulating the substantial risks that arise when “submission” or “following” becomes self-effacement – and what happens when a woman bypasses her husband and goes directly to God.
CHAPTER IV
THE CO-FOUNDER’S WIFE: “FOLLOWING BILL OR FOLLOWING JESUS”

As Chapter 2 showed, Promise Keepers asserts that when a man is a “servant leader,” modeling integrity and biblical values to his wife and children, their “following becomes a delight.” Chapters 2 and 3 showed, moreover, that PK writers typically assert or hint that a servant leader is a woman’s gateway to the sacred and to salvation; that he is responsible for her spiritual life, identity, and stability—in other words for her entire existence; and that women, being weak, require such male leadership and rescue. Bill McCartney, the PK co-founder, is vociferous in his belief that this is so. But it is precisely these claims that his wife, Lyndi McCartney, challenges in Sold Out: Becoming Man Enough to Make a Difference, a book the couple published in 1997. This chapter examines her story, the sole female first-person account in the writings considered for this thesis. Her observations reinforce the PK commitment to marriage—but quietly, though explicitly, challenge the notion that God wants only men to lead families. Her observations also provide a look at why women might support Promise Keepers, but doing so while crafting their own meanings from its teachings—and using their meanings to take PK teachings in perhaps unintended directions.

Sold Out recounts the McCartneys’ marital struggles and efforts to know Christ, and particularly Bill McCartney’s struggle to align his behavior with his ideals—and even to become aware that a gap between the two existed. His chapters
constitute most of the text; hers are nine relatively short essays that contain often-pointed rejoinders.\textsuperscript{162} She provides a glimpse of conservative Christian women’s resistance to men’s assertions of power, and the women’s assertions of their own worth and independence. Though the book surely is a public relations tool for PK as well as a heartfelt, prayed-over testimonial, Lyndi McCartney’s comments can easily be read as quietly challenging and undermining parts of PK’s message of male superiority and dominance: She is not “follower” but partner. But it is also clear from her husband’s writings that he hears what he wants to hear and takes from PK’s teachings what he wishes.\textsuperscript{163}

For her part, she comes to realize that she has misunderstood what “following” means. As a girl in the 1950s, she says, she was taught to subordinate herself to her husband’s needs, never to be “an equal or a valued member of his team,” just as working-class boys were taught to be avowedly independent, especially from females. As girls, she writes,

we were raised to believe that whatever men do has value in life. A woman was supposed to find her value in subordinating her life to her husband’s work, his dreams, his will. ... To breech this unwritten law was to fail as a woman, a wife, and a mother.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162} Though her essays significantly alter the feel and message of the book, she does not share the byline. Rather, it goes to Bill McCartney, “with David Halbrook.” It is possible that she declined the byline; she says often in her essays that her style is much quieter than her husband’s. Bill McCartney’s first book — From Ashes to Glory — was published in the year PK was founded and focuses on his coaching career, with multiple tributes to him by prominent sports figures. It is markedly more self-congratulatory than Sold Out. Sold Out’s 281 pages focus substantially on his problems, and he makes clear that he is still struggling to meet God’s standard, still being sanctified by Jesus Christ — that he has “the hope of glory” (256). The book does include tributes to him by his and Lyndi’s children.

\textsuperscript{163} On the “praying over,” see the Introduction, xiii-xvii. For a challenge to McCartney’s use of Scripture regarding the centrality of earthly fathers, see Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, “Promise Keepers and Proof-Text Poker?” (Sojourners, January/February 1998),16-21. The Scripture in question is Isaiah 38:19, which McCartney quotes as “a father to the children shall make known the truth” (his emphasis).

\textsuperscript{164} “Lyndi: A Member of the Team?” Sold Out, 122.
Neither the girls nor the boys understood that “God meant us to be teammates,” she says.\textsuperscript{165} Although Bill’s conversion to Jesus Christ in the mid-1970s evidently set the example for her to convert, too,\textsuperscript{166} now her faith is hard-won and her own. Once she “lived as though the way to find ... intimacy with God was to follow Bill;”\textsuperscript{167} now she knows she can and should get her identity and strength directly from Jesus. She asserts that she should follow God, and that she and her husband should submit \textit{to each other} before God.

Lyndi McCartney’s wisdom and faith have come at a cost that seems disproportionate to that suffered by her husband, who – in both their accounts – appears to have been the primary sinner in the marriage. Thus, her experiences show the opportunities and risks involved in wifely “submission,” as well as the lack of clear, absolute lines between submission to the sacred and victimization. Certainly her brokenness, which preceded her surrender to Christ, was far more harsh than whatever suffering her husband experienced before he “turned it over.” There is no suggestion, moreover, that he was “broken” at all. But she is committed to the value of being “disciplined” and “trained” by God. One critical point of \textit{Sold Out} is that Bill McCartney’s decision to work on his marriage took 20 years from the time he let Christ in, and more than 30 from the time they married in 1962. Though he accepted Jesus in 1974 and showed many signs of growth, he did not stop drinking until 1990 – the year he helped to found PK – and continued to badly neglect his wife and family through most of 1994. She says that is partly because she and Bill were not addressing unresolved issues in their marriage, the “serious problems and pain that his alcoholism had caused to our relationship,” and were not trying to “repair the

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{166} “Lyndi: Bill’s Conversion and Its Influence on His Family,” 80
It was in the fall of 1994 that he finally received his wake-up call: God mandates a husband to “bring his wife to full splendor and radiance.”

In chapters that speak sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, to one another, the McCartneys recount decades of struggle, broken promises, despair, joy—all compounded by Bill’s addictions, compulsions, and zealotry, and, Lyndi says, by her clinging to him and focusing all her emotional energies on “fixing” him and none on herself. The accounts tell of his insensitivity, arrogance, and rages, of how he uprooted her—twice—at eight and nine months pregnant, with as little as 20 minutes’ notice, to pack up and move to a new city and new coaching job. Though his volcanic temper, excessive drinking and overbearing approach were apparent from their first date, she focused on what he could become and wanted to become. She recalls how he rejected her challenges and demands that he spend less time on football, and more time with her and the children. Through all this she hung on, hoping he would change and making his loves her own, letting his life create her identity. Eventually she stayed only because she had made a commitment in her marriage vows before God.

By spring 1993, she had lost 80 pounds, unable to keep food down; she was “nonfunctional” and suicidal. When her husband noticed, he noticed because, she says, he “could only see or hear my pain when I stopped supporting him.” (What she does not say in this account is this: On New Year’s Day 1993, her husband

---

167 “Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus,” 233
168 “Lyndi: Bill’s Conversion and Its Influence on His Family,” 80-81.
169 McCartney, “Sunday Morning Warrior,” 175.
170 His addictions and compulsions included coaching (49), a three-pack-a-day cigarette habit (72), and alcohol—drinking Old Spice aftershave if alcohol wasn’t available (51). He describes how his negative thoughts “snowball” if he does not meet each one with a Bible verse (212).
173 Ibid., 180.
confessed an affair of two decades before, then headed off to coach at the Fiesta Bowl. She spun into a breakdown. Her food issue was one of bulimia, not stomach upset.)

Marital counseling was helpful, but in the fall he returned to coaching and the PK ministry. In desperation – brokenness, perhaps – Lyndi finally “turned it over” to Christ. She shifted from praying that God would fix Bill to praying that God would fix her. She says, quoting Heb. 2:11, that her grasping for Bill had led God to “discipline” her, to “train” her, to show her that “I needed to stop worrying about trying to change Bill and let God change me.”

As she tells it, she found her own strength, identity, and autonomy, separate from her husband and based in Jesus, whose love and support were unshakable. She came to see Jesus Christ’s value of her – and she had to let go of her impossible expectations for what her husband should be to her. She had to let God change Bill in God’s own time. She had to put her relationship with Jesus first: “As I turned my attention toward developing my love relationship with Jesus, I found my worth and my foundation for living.” Once she “stopped grasping” and blaming Bill, he was able to be less defensive and to listen to her. He changed. He reached out, and they became better able to minister to each other. He became able to take responsibility for how he had hurt her, and she realized that he had suffered because she had made him her God and blamed him for “every deficit I felt.” While Lyndi worked on herself and her relationship with Christ, she says, God worked to open her husband’s eyes.

He says the counseling – with a male Christian psychologist who bluntly told him that McCartney’s was to be a “war” against “pride” – made him fully aware that

---

175 “Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus,” 234.
176 Lyndi echoes the idea in the Study Bible’s “Blame Game” (6-7) that blaming is “a stronghold of the enemy,” in “Lyndi: Reflections on Marriage,” 181.
he was "grossly out of touch with what she needed from me," and that he bulldozed people rather than respectfully listening, and met any criticism with "an aggressive defense." "In the ugly final analysis, in most situations I think about myself first: my comfort, my reputation, my rights." His behavior, he saw, was far out of line with the example of Jesus: A meek man is "who has died to himself and his personal needs ... has forfeited his agenda and found his sole identity in Jesus Christ. The meek joyfully endure persecution for the sake of righteousness." He decided to do whatever necessary to save the marriage, and began wondering whether he could reconcile work and family, but backslid when football season came. He justified his working by thinking he and Lyndi had dealt with their problems. Though the marital counseling "got my attention," he says, it was a minister who gave him his real wake-up call.178

In the fall of 1994, a guest pastor told a Sunday service, in essence, that a wife is not her own person but rather a reflection of her husband: "If you want to know about a man's character, then look into the face of his wife. Whatever he has invested in or withheld from her will be reflected in her countenance." The minister spoke, in Bill's words, of "how God has mandated that every man bring his wife to full splendor and radiance. ... It is the man's role to nurture and affirm his wife so she can blossom and flourish in all of her rich womanhood and God-given gifting."179 What Lyndi's face showed was "slow decay, emotional torment ... drained, depleted, unfulfilled." With that shock, Bill McCartney recalls, he decided to quit coaching at the University of Colorado. He began to put more of his energy into his marriage. When he had doubts

177 "Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus," 235-236; also 181.
178 "A Marriage Built on Sand," 159-162.
179 "Sunday Morning Warrior," 175.
about his decision, he received affirmation in seeing “the delicate serenity slowly returning to Lyndi’s face.”

This recounting of a pastor’s holding husbands accountable for the well-being of their families is stock fare in “headship” or “servant leadership” doctrine. But Lyndi McCartney adds meanings that build women’s resistance and agency into it. She relates a revelation she experienced. In her essay “Following Bill or Following Jesus,” she reflects on her decades-long motto of commitment to her husband, the words of Ruth, “Wherever thou goest, I will go.” The idea was even inscribed on a small figure on their home. But – a couple of years after she had hit bottom and learned to follow Jesus – a female friend affirmed and added to the lesson. Lyndi had always understood the inscription to apply to her relationship to her husband. No, the friend said; the inscription actually said, “Wherever God leads I will follow.” The friend also passed on a lesson from her male pastor in premarital counseling: Husband and wife are equal partners before God. Envision “a triangle, with three equal sides” – one the foundation, the other two being the spouses, each leading to the peak, which is God. “If each person focuses on moving closer to God – individually – they would simultaneously draw closer to each other as they grew closer to God.”

Lyndi observes that her marriage would have been entirely different if that pastor had been around when she wed in 1962. She had followed Bill as her “Christian duty,” thinking that doing so “would get me closer to God faster than going to God myself.”

---

180 “Saying Goodbye to CU,” 202; and 174.
181 The power that Lyndi finds in the servant leadership concept is shared by other women in congregations where concepts similar to it are espoused. In the congregations studied by Brasher, men are expected to lead family life (Godly Women, 149-50). “But with this authority comes responsibility: husbands and fathers are responsible before God for the well-being and happiness of everyone else in the family. If a family member is miserable under a man’s headship, then that man has failed in the proper exercise of his authority.” Similar values hold true for male congregational leaders (130-1, 134). Brasher notes that men can be subjected to “considerable criticism.” She also finds substantial variation in the meanings and applicability of submission, depending on whether a situation entails daily interactions, sexuality, “major decisions,” or “overall marital status.” Mutuality is the norm in the first two; in the second two, the husband takes
didn’t realize that following Bill, emotionally and spiritually, sometimes meant I ignored Jesus when He called, 'Lyndi! Come, follow Me.’”

Her husband, however, has trouble seeing this distinction. On the one hand, he writes about the marriage vows that he and his wife now repeat to each other daily: “I solemnly vow before God in the power of the Holy Spirit to love, honor, cherish, and obey and be faithful to you all the days of my life.” Elsewhere, he says “True love requires two people to work tirelessly through difficulties, communicate effectively and constantly, and bear with one another at all times.” And he affirms that Lyndi teaches him, that God has “gifted her” with an “instinctive wisdom (that) she brings to almost every situation.” She is, Bill says, the first person from whom he seeks “counsel ... on a daily basis. She amazes me with her deep understanding of how God works in our lives.” He also notes “her value to the team, her talents, strength, and stamina.” Though the Bible and official PK rhetoric call the wife the “weaker partner,” Bill McCartney frequently writes appreciatively of his wife’s strength and “steadfastness,” saying her continuing faithfulness to him is “the most compelling proof of God’s willingness to heal and redeem us.” He attributes the progress and growth in their marriage to her “faithfulness and perseverance.”

Yet he struggles with this mutuality and humility. He and Lyndi both refer to it. He also writes her out of the script at critical points – as when he refers to the four children repeatedly as “my,” not “our,” and describes PK conference testimonies as “the evidence of God’s stern, tender heart for the men and families of this nation.” His

---

the lead and the wife “submits,” but the husband has responsibility “to God for his wife’s response to the decision he has made” (148).

182 “Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus,” 232-236.
183 Introduction, xxii.
184 “A Question of Integrity,” 168.
185 “Christ in Me, The Hope of Glory,” 260.
wife suggests that his upbringing, and that of other men of his generation, may put pride in their way, and she asks that they remember that “God gives grace to the humble.”  

He also takes full blame for her devastation, in contrast to her assertions that she helped to set herself up for a fall. Speaking of spring 1993, he says, “It was pure torture — taking in the daily sight of someone so ravaged, so damaged, and knowing it’s your lack of character that caused it.”

Bill McCartney is clearly attached to the concept that he can be a servant leader, and his comments are astonishing for what they say about his sense of self-importance. He says he neglected to “protect” and “shepherd” his wife from the beginning, gave her no “clear leadership or direction.” Now he sees the fruits of his awakening to the Lord’s mandate. For example, 15 months after he quit coaching, a woman friend of theirs remarked on the “true contentment” she was seeing in Lyndi. Bill writes: “Only the Lord can do something like that. Through me, He is weaving a miracle in Lyndi. She is slowly recovering her splendor. God chooses the man as His representative to complete the woman — and the woman to complete the man. Together in Christ we are whole.” He adds:

Only as I continue to die to myself and willingly give away my rights does Lyndi flourish. And as the cycle deepens and matures, she happily pushes me toward the things I enjoy as a man. It is the same with Jesus: As I die to myself and surrender my rights, I tap into the full breadth of His love. As the relationship deepens and matures, He causes my cup of joy to overflow.

---

187 See “A Note to the Reader,” 267; “Priceless Testimonies,” 128; “The Truth About Team,” 125; and “Lyndi: A Member of the Team?” 122.
188 “A Marriage Built on Sand,” 158.
189 “The Truth About Team,” 121.
190 “Christ in Me, The Hope of Glory,” 259.
191 Ibid., 260.
Lyndi, however, firmly distinguishes between following her husband and following God. It was, first, Jesus — and her abject surrender to Him — that made the difference in her life. It is God and Lyndi who are responsible for her spiritual life and decisions, she asserts — not her husband. She also makes clear that a man is not her mediator for interpreting Scripture: She interprets it according to her own understanding and with the aid of other women, who are part of her spiritual community, as well as that of her husband. 192

This does not mean she rejects the idea of servant leadership overall or, even, a degree of male spiritual leadership, protection, and direction. She affirms Bill’s assertions that God chose a group of men to lead the nation’s revival, for example. She says “servant leadership” was her favorite teaching early in the PK movement, and describes what she says PK taught: “A leader is a servant who enables those he leads to be all they can be.” But most of her writing is not about being led, protected, directed. Rather, she speaks of her husband’s presence — his commitment, mutuality, listening. And it is not at all clear that her husband is, even now, acting as a “servant leader” to her in the spiritual sense or any other; she is finding her own way, and she says that in their marriage, she and Bill “will trust Jesus Christ to give us His strength and guidance.” 193

She also suggests that women, too, can be leaders. In the Moses tale, after all, men and women led their families through the wilderness, she observes — in her first essay. Men, she says, should “consider your wife as your teammate, not just as someone to protect, direct, and lead, but also as someone who can help you.” Though

192 See, for example, her amending his interpretation of Eccles. 4:12 to argue for the wife’s involvement alongside her husband, with God: “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (“Lyndi: A Member of the Team?” 124).
193 See “Priceless Testimonies,” 129, and “Promise Keepers: Memories to Last a Lifetime,” 142. For other examples of Lyndi’s apparently desiring his presence more than anything else, see “Stand in the Gap,” 250. On trusting Jesus for “strength and guidance,” see “Saying Goodbye to CU,” 205.
this might be a challenge for male pride, she says, it's important. God created Eve “uniquely” as helper, and “If you leave your wife on the sidelines, you may struggle longer than necessary.” Clearly the “helpmate” role to Lyndi is not secondary but critical: The wife is not just a “loyal cheerleader” but a teammate there on the field with the husband. 194

To be teammates means he has to see himself as a player on the field with me, not the coach pacing the sidelines wearing the whistle. The more he lets the Lord wear the whistle, and sits down on the bench of life beside me, the more we will go out together and win.195

These assertions, incidentally, were published about a year after one of PK’s main writers, Gary Smalley, referred to himself as “coach” and his wife, Norma, as “MVP.” This timing raises the possibility that Lyndi McCartney was responding not only to her husband’s views but also to Smalley’s, going on the written record as explicitly rejecting a central PK writer’s claim that men are God’s chosen leaders and women are secondary figures.196

Lyndi’s arguments suggest that she, too, is a spiritual leader. She has written a core part of her own theology, one that defines dependence on a man as a sin: Her behavior was “idolatry” and required her to “repent.”197 She was able to see “the truth” with the help of the Holy Spirit. Now,

God has given me victories and clothed me with His dignity. I’m bolder, stronger, and not nearly so intimidated as I once was by what others say and do. Whereas I used to keep quiet, now I’m speaking up. If I’m not heard the first time, I don’t hide within myself anymore. I say it again. ...198

194 “Lyndi: Young Love and Hope for the Future,” 10; also, “Lyndi: A Member of the Team?” 122, 124-5.
195 Ibid., 125.
196 Smalley, “A Man and His Family,” Go the Distance, 128-9.
197 “Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus,” 235.
In addition, her sacrifices give her leverage, a power of righteousness cemented by the mandate of servant leadership — that, in the words of the Study Bible, men are “committed to serving him through serving their wives,” are to “give their lives for their wives and are to always put their wives’ needs before their own.”

Now that Bill has seen the light, Lyndi says, “I am learning to enjoy my privileged position as Bill’s wife.” When a woman asks if she feels guilty that he sacrificed his coaching career for her, she responds that, no — she sacrificed her life for him:

Bill always said he valued and loved me. When he actually gave up that which he valued most for my sake, he demonstrated what he had said all along. He showed that he was a man of his word — not just to say it but to live it. Now our marriage demonstrates the kind of love God wants us to have, where we really lay down our lives for each other.

Just how mutual a sacrifice this has been is arguable. He left a coaching career at the best time — at the peak, in a winning season, having turned around his team of infamous losers. But for her, the servant leader ideal accords a standard of behavior that far surpasses what she has experienced in more than 30 years with her husband. It gives her what she wants — a marriage. With it, and the mutuality that she claims and her husband strives for, she can also lay claim to being his gateway to healing and even salvation. His salvation is inextricably tied to how well he treats her. She, the “weaker partner,” becomes, in a sense, his ticket to heaven. The power does not flow solely from man to woman.

199 “Song of Songs: At a Glance,” Study Bible, 724; “Marriage 101,” 1300.
200 “Lyndi: Walking His Talk,” 204.
201 After turning around the Buffaloes’ losing record, McCartney had to deal with his players’ legal problems in cases from rape to disorderly conduct. See Sally Jenkins, “Seeing the Light: Coach Bill McCartney’s Faith Has Endured in Trial and Triumph at Colorado.” Sports Illustrated, 31 Dec. 1990, 4p. Online. VIVA: General Reference Center Gold (22 May 2000).
Still, she does not assert herself on every issue. She is often judiciously vague and says she has faith that God will guide her husband. It is possible that she is allowing him enough assertions of machismo to save face – what Marie Griffith and Paul Harvey describe as a common tactic of “submissive” wives: “collusion” in male “fantasies of power.”202 Her words are consistent with the “quiet and intimate voice” preferred for women that Margaret Lamberts Bendroth identifies in “fundamentalist discourse,” but her actions are rather “feminist.” 203 Thus she reflects Brasher’s finding that “women’s opinions on gender and family issues are significantly more nuanced than the public stands of their congregations,” including the issue of mutuality. This texture exists even while Lyndi McCartney is firm in her commitment to marriage and to the Genesis lesson that woman is eternally intended to struggle in her relationship with her husband – especially until both spouses surrender to Christ. 204

There are, however, issues remaining, each involving what level of suffering she feels is necessary. The pivotal question is what she would have done if Bill had not let Jesus into his heart, and what advice she would give to women whose husbands do not. Would she stand by her faith in the will of God, and advise a woman in such a situation to stay and hope that the Spirit would eventually move within him – and, while she waited, turn to Jesus for her solace, her well-being, her one “love relationship,” and thus perhaps function as an example to her husband? Once a person does let Jesus in, she is convinced, Jesus will craft change – if slowly. Women,

202 Griffith and Harvey, “Wifely Submission: The SBC Resolution,” 2. John Stratton Hawley and Wayne Proudfoot also describe a nostalgic vision of women’s “yield(ing) before men to produce the greater harmony,” introduction to Fundamentalism and Gender, 30.
203 Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 121-125.
204 On public stands, see Brasher, 126; on mutuality, 148-9. Even Women’s Aglow Fellowship, which had been proud in the 1970s to support female submission to male authority, shifted in 1995 to advocate “mutual submission and intimacy between women and men,” according to Griffith (God’s Daughters, 45). See also 183-5, 197-8.
then, should have patience, and put their own relationship with God above all else. Even if a man's acts don't match the PK ideals he espouses, his advocacy of those standards — God's standards — "is an act of faith that God will honor," given time. She does say she hopes husbands won't take as long as Bill did, that maybe men and women can learn from the McCartneys' errors and speed up the men's progress. Would she advise a woman to stay, not to put her husband on the defensive by challenging him — and then endure emotional and perhaps physical abuse, as long as the man showed that he was trying to follow Jesus? Her own account sounds as if, in the name of mutuality and fairness, she implicitly blames herself in part for her husband's inability or refusal to change — as if she was wrong to push him to change his extraordinarily crass behavior. Who is to hold the husband accountable if he does not listen to God, congregation, or wife? 205

In addition, on the whole, Lyndi McCartney's accounts show that although she has found a new power, it is accorded in this system only to select women. She is a "good" woman: heterosexual; seeing women and men as complements in God's ideal order; long-suffering and self-censoring; and remaining with her husband despite her awareness of his flaws. It helps that she has a high profile and status accorded the wife of the PK co-founder. And it helps that he is manically committed to his Father's mandate that he be a "servant leader" — and that he was pushed into awareness and action by a psychologist and a minister. With all that, Lyndi McCartney might now find it relatively easy to ignore his self-involvement without much harm to herself.

205 Lyndi McCartney, "Reflections on Promise Keepers," Sold Out, 145. See also "Lyndi: Bill's Conversion and Its Influence on His Family," 82; "Lyndi: Young Love and Hope for the Future," 10-11; and "Lyndi: Following Bill or Following Jesus," 235. Also, "Lyndi: Reflections on Marriage," 182. As a point of comparison, Brasher's congregations assert that although adultery is tolerated, physical abuse and drug/alcohol abuse are grounds for congregational intervention, police intervention, or divorce. See 152-3.
She might even smile when her husband and the Promise Keepers suggest that only men sharpen men\textsuperscript{206} and say the wife is the “weaker partner” needing protection.

With Lyndi McCartney’s experiences in mind, the next chapter deconstructs the “servant leader” and other aspects of the Promise Keepers theology, and how the theology places many Others at a disadvantage. Specifically, the chapter examines Promise 4, a foundation of the servant leader commitment; it challenges PK’s version of history; and it dissect implications of “sin,” PK’s male-sexed Trinity, and PK’s use of psychological concepts.

CHAPTER V:
DECONSTRUCTING POWER IN PK'S THEOLOGY

As Lyndi McCartney's account shows, the Promise Keepers' servant leader ideal can aid women's interests in a stable marriage and family life. But because the concept makes male power formal and female power a matter of maneuvering within that structure, this chapter examines how the servant leader ideal and related aspects of Promise Keepers' theology write heterosexual male privilege into God's script for humanity. Specifically, the chapter discusses PK's Promise 4; the ministry's claims about masculinity, God and Jesus, and sin and morality; PK's God imagery; and the ministry's use of psychological concepts. The chapter also discusses some implications of these strategies.

PK's theology seeks to naturalize heterosexual male dominance in several ways. Its Promise 4, which asks men to commit to "building strong marriages and families through love, protection and Biblical values," expresses and seeks to institutionalize some of these methods, as this chapter will show. As already discussed, PK uses the stories of the Creation and the Fall to argue for a divinely created order of male and female, leader and led, with God-given, innate, and different traits. But PK also makes ahistorical claims of the nature of masculinity, of God and Jesus, and of God-mandated morality. It creates an image of God not just as male but as Father, and of God's Son as Savior – whom men are meant to be like. It creates a valorization of the maleness of Jesus the Christ that turns the male into a virtual object of worship, and the female into a lesser being, an Other. It defines sin in
ways that can oppress the meek and teach them to distrust their intuition and instincts. Last, PK employs “the ‘psychological,’” a therapeutic discourse promulgated by marriage counselors, psychotherapists, and writers of self-help books, as well as PK’s “small-group” support structure. “Experts” within this system articulate and legitimate a message of a normative self and behaviors that include male “leadership” (dominance) and female “following” (submission), and the support groups can create pressure to confess and conform.207

First, consider PK’s ahistorical claims. PK asserts that a golden age existed before the world fell into steep moral decline in the 1960s. It also claims that there is one, eternally static character of God, one eternal standard of right and wrong, and one permanent standard for “godly men.”

Although some PK writers explicitly reject the harsh authoritarianism that adherents may have suffered at the hands of their parents,208 and others pointedly note the racial discrimination of “the good old days” and today,209 the ministry’s overarching message is that a golden age of “morality,” respect, hard work, and stable families preceded the 1960s.210 But nineteenth century factory owners railed against the loafing and “blue Monday” habits of workers unaccustomed to factory regimens. And attentive motherhood has been a privilege of the wealthy, since mothers have always worked – inside and outside the home. Abortion has long been used – sometimes without controversy, sometimes with – even in the late eighteenth and

207 Given the power that this system of self-knowledge, “selfing,” and confession entails, and PK’s emphasis on sexual transgressions, observations by Michel Foucault seem apropos. Foucault describes a “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality” in the West. Analysis of this, he argues, must “account for the fact that it is spoken about, … discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (11). See also his discussion of “confessing,” in The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990): 58-73.
208 On authoritarian parents, see, for example, Smalley’s “Five Secrets,” in Seven Promises 1999, 96-7.
early nineteenth centuries, and venereal disease itself has been targeted in major
public campaigns in the past century. Men and women created subterranean – as well
as visible – same-sex relationships and networks in the nineteenth century. Nor have
fathers and husbands, as a group, been loving, nurturing, and faithful toward their
families. Colonial Puritan fathers, though deemed responsible for their families’
salvation, did not view tenderness as a duty. In the Southern colonies, markers of
white manhood were the freedom to rape any unescorted woman and the duty to
protect the “virtue” of females in one’s family by attacking other men (if a woman was
enslaved or Native American, she was legitimate prey at any time – a predation that
for black women continued well into the twentieth century). Husbands in the latter
nineteenth century were so promiscuous that middle-class white women and other
reformers challenged their extramarital behaviors. In the twentieth century, through
the 1930s, fundamentalist fathers often were “either absent or emotionally distant
authority figures,” prompting “periodic pleas for more involvement.” And in Boston,
social workers knew well the problems of wife-beating and marital rape, as well as
child neglect and abuse, including incest, in the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries.  

210 See, for example, Bill McCartney’s argument that “God is calling men back to God and family” in a chapter on
211 For discussions of Southern violence, and its relationship to white masculinities, see Brown, Good Wives, Nasty
Wenches, and Nancy MacLean’s Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan. For a discussion
of work habits among people new to factory laboring in the nineteenth century – and employers’ frustration, especially
with “blue Monday” – see Herbert G. Gutman, Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in
American Working-Class and Social History, especially 19-32. For a history of venereal disease, including Progressive
reformers’ fight against the “crisis of the family,” see Allan M. Brandt, No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal
Disease in the United States Since 1880, and John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate Matters: A History of
Sexuality in America, especially p. 181-3. For a history of abortion and abortion policy, see James Mohr, Abortion in
America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900. George Chauncey (Gay New York: Gender, Urban
Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World: 1890-1940) finds visible and very alive gay male subcultures in New
York City at the turn of the twentieth century and later. For a portrayal of a visible and socially accepted romantic
relationship between two African American women in the mid-nineteenth century, see Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is
Like Yours’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century.” As
for Puritan fathers in eighteenth century Connecticut, and their abuse of wives, see Cornelia Hughes Dayton, Women
Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789, especially 134-38. For fundamentalist fathers, see
middle-class model of family life — including the stereotyped nuclear-family 1950s, which were precisely a cause of the absent-father syndrome that the movement seeks to address.

In addition, the PK Bible and Bill McCartney say that people can't define God to suit themselves, that "worshiping God other than He is" is idolatry. But Promise Keepers is part of a long tradition of defining and redefining God and Jesus. Karen Armstrong argues, "The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time." Francis Schussler Fiorenza and Gordon D. Kaufman also note that conceptions of God change according to social climate, political power structures, scientific theory. In other words, "God" is constructed.

PK's God is a stern yet loving, patient and understanding Father, and PK's Jesus is nurturing yet assertive, resists temptations, and submits himself entirely to God's will. Yet God in the Old Testament could be savagely and sadistically brutal and capricious, and prophets of Israel experienced God as racking — Armstrong says, "a physical pain that wrenched their every limb and filled them with rage and elation." Deists in the eighteenth century reflected the Enlightenment reliance on reason and rejection of the cruel, orthodox God; they portrayed God as creating the world, then impassively leaving it to run methodically, a clockwork. And men who subscribed to the "muscular Christianity" of the early twentieth century United States saw a Jesus who was aggressive and strong, and businesslike, not in the least

Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 100; for domestic abuse in nineteenth and twentieth century Boston, see Gordon's Heroes of Their Own Lives.

bit emotional or sentimental — meaning, effeminate. Many men in early
fundamentalism saw Christ as "a demanding taskmaster," and they sought to obey
"the divine command to strive and toil." But early fundamentalism also shunned
psychological concepts and emotional intimacy. PK's advocacy of emotional
intimacy and emotional displays is only one way in which its masculine ideal is
situated in a particular historical moment: Though the ministry advocates
emotionality, a stereotypically feminine trait, it reflects aspects of
late-twentieth-century, mainstream, masculinities in emphasizing male dominance
and some sort of breadwinner status, its aversion to homosexuality, and its use of
sports culture.

Last, conceptions of right and wrong also are historically constructed. The PK
Bible commentators write,

Cultures change and technology advances, but right and wrong, sin and
righteousness don't change. God himself defines these core issues. ... God's
timeless truth never changes. The fundamental issues are always
understanding of and obedience to what God has revealed in Scripture. Live
by them and the land experiences peace and harmony. Violate them and the
land is struck with a curse.

Of course, Scripture reveals different truths at different times and to different people.
People in the past believed that God sanctioned slavery, wife-beating, keeping
concubines, and stoning to death an adulterous woman at her father's door.

213 PK offers a concise profile of God the Father in its Study Bible. See "Man to Man: About Being a Son of God,"
xxi-xxii. For historical Gods, see Armstrong, xxii and 310. Bendroth discusses the fundamentalists' work mandates
(Fundamentalism and Gender, 52), and Watt describes old-line fundamentalism's contempt for modern psychology (A
Transforming Faith, 137-142). For "muscular Christianity" in the Teddy Roosevelt era, see Bederman's "The Women
Have Had Charge," especially p. 441.
214 "Malachi 4:4-6: The Bible's Core Issues," Study Bible, 1039.
In addition to using ahistorical arguments, PK points to its interpretation of the Bible as being God's unquestionable Word. To PK, servant leadership is mandated by God's creating the male-headed family in Eden, and Jesus' admonishing men to humble and loving service. PK's Promise 4, with its commitment to "building strong marriages and families through love, protection and Biblical values," is a medium for effecting its vision. "Love" and "Biblical values" are clear enough, but the aspect of "protection" is one that PK does not explain. There are only vague references — such as the "weaker partner" descriptions and Gary Smalley's telling men to protect their wives as the team's "MVP" — and the images of women as fragile. In addition, the Study Bible's reference to the wife as "weaker partner" carries no qualifier; other Bible translations note that "weaker" refers only to physical strength. And although the Study Bible commentator says in Genesis that "each" of God's creations is "responsible to protect and nurture" the creation, the passage also says that Adam was placed in the garden to watch over it; therefore, the man's role as protector takes precedence over the woman's. Given these ambiguities — especially in PK's core text, the Study Bible — some speculation is in order, buttressed by the work of feminist scholars Kathleen M. Brown and Judith Stacey. Historically, "protection" has been an aspect of patriarchy; it has meant, in part, guarding female sexuality against interlopers and marauders who might dilute a family's blood line and produce

---

215 In the Study Bible, the "weaker partner" reference is in 1 Peter 3:7, and the Bible commentators do not qualify it (1384), as well as in lay writings such as Smalley's ("A Man and His Family," Go the Distance 128-9), and McCartney's characterizations of his responsibilities to his wife in Sold Out.

216 One, the New English Bible With the Apocrypha, says: "pay honour to the woman’s body, not only because it is weaker ..." (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971): 299, New Testament section. Another, The Amplified Bible, says, "... you married men should live considerably with [your wives], with an intelligent recognition [of the marriage relation], honoring the woman as [physically] the weaker ..." (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987):1453. On the other hand, the Good News Bible with Deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha (Nashville: Catholic Bible Press/Thomas Nelson, 1993) tells husbands to live with their wives, holding "the proper understanding that they are more delicate than you" (New Testament p. 291).

"illegitimate" claimants to property, Brown notes.\textsuperscript{218} Such protection, while not necessarily helping a woman whose husband claimed the use of her body, might be better than the lack of protection – sexual, social, and economic – that might befall a woman who is altogether without a man.

In the context of Promise Keepers, we can construe protection to include these and other factors. A Promise Keeper presumably commits to protecting his family against evil by teaching them biblical values – by evangelizing them – what James Dobson calls his “number one responsibility” as a father.\textsuperscript{219} From PK’s writings, we can construe “Satan” or “evil” to include, first, sexual issues: nonmarital sex and its related ills of abortion, “illegitimate” births, sexually transmitted disease, homosexuality, and pornography. Crime may also be a concern of evil, although a man’s ability to “protect” his family against it – whether in schools or on streets, and perhaps even by intruders, including Internet predators – may be limited.\textsuperscript{220} He may have more success with economic “protection,” which becomes critical in women’s lives. As Judith Stacey has found, women’s continuing inequality in waged work, their “second shift,” and their continuing responsibility for child care, may leave them more inclined to accept the “patriarchal bargain” that headship entails, accepting some level of second-class status in exchange for security.\textsuperscript{221} The last potential arena for “protection” is emotional, for which PK’s writings make a strong case. As Chapter 3 showed, PK portrays women as anxious, insecure, weepy, and requiring nurture,

\textsuperscript{218} For patriarchy as guarding female sexuality, family property, and the social order, see, for example, Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, 4-5 and 92-93.


\textsuperscript{221} Stacey explicates the “patriarchal bargain” concept defined by sociologist Deniz Kanisyotii: “In the classical patriarchal bargain, women accept overt subordination in exchange for protection and secure social status. The modern patriarchal bargain sugarcoats this exchange by wrapping it in an ideology of separate spheres and romantic love.” Later Stacey argues that this modern exchange has, on the whole, “collapsed” because of widespread changes in family
and innately more emotional than men. A man’s protection in this realm might be simply a matter of the support that spouses ought to provide partners or to their children, female or male. Or it might extend to an understanding of women as emotionally unreliable, and be translated into behaviors such as teaching that view to children.

Perpetuating the view of women as weak and threatened perpetuates, in a sense, a big part of what PK is about: curtailing female independence outside a patriarchal family order, and making those limits desirable to women. Females need male protection and leadership. Given the images of Eve and other women, we can surmise that the ministry sees spiritual protection as necessary also because a woman is morally incapable of providing it as well as her husband can. Such a project would be consistent with an observation made by John Stratton Hawley and Wayne Proudfoot: “For the rhetoric of religious machismo to succeed, its proponents often find it very helpful to feel the presence of women who require defense.” A context of danger or perceived danger can aid this approach: “Symbols of endangered womanhood can be more easily sustained if they are nourished in an environment where real women must depend on men to defend them.”222 As women who favor a conservative religious family order complain, there are dangers, because in secular society there are few limits on socially approved sexual behavior — men’s or women’s.223

Two other key aspects of PK’s project of making male dominance seem God-ordained are its use of language referring to God and its suggestion that God and

---

222 Hawley and Proudfoot, 33
223 Debra Kaufman, 9-10.
Jesus are ideals for males, not females. It does so even while imbuing God and Jesus with traits stereotypically viewed as feminine — such as nurturing, calming, loving, and even submissive, as Jesus is to the Father's will. Not only does PK sex God and the risen Jesus as male, but it also does so with the Holy Spirit, referring explicitly to it as “He” in its Statement of Faith. 224 PK's view of God as “eternally existing in three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” — makes it easier to emphasize separate natures of each, and to use them in different ways, and to interpret life in certain ways. As Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman say:

If God is identified only as father, then one tends to see the created order in terms of the will of God (creator of that order) and its fulfillment; however, if God is identified mainly as Christ the savior, then salvation and redemption, in contrast to the present created order, are emphasized; if God is viewed exclusively as spirit, the ecstatic elements in religious life become highlighted. 225

PK writings employ all three but focus more on God and Jesus. Although writers refer variously to God as “Lord,” “coach,” “friend,” and “warrior,” “Father” is the primary form of address. PK's emphasis on “God the Father” is not, however, solely an effort to legitimate patriarchy. It expresses an intense loneliness and feeling of abandonment and lack of viable role models for men, especially as fathers. It expresses men's loneliness for friends; God will be a friend. It expresses man's yearnings for fathers; God will be a Father. The Father, and a “lost family relationship” with the Father, constitute the central motif in an introductory essay to the Men's Study Bible. That essay tells men that God, the Father, can — through a personal relationship with them

224 See the Promise Keepers Statement of Faith, Study Bible, xv-xvi.
225 The explication of meanings of the “persons” is Richard Niebuhr's and is described by Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman, “God,” 149.
— ease “the pain of a lost or nonexistent relationship with a father.” 226 Bill

McCartney's description of God is an extended meditation on the nature of God's love, but a few sentences drive it home: “He keeps telling me to do my best. He keeps telling me that, no matter what, He still loves me. I believe Him. He is my best Friend.”

Gordon Dalbey recounts praying with men and guiding them to ask their “heavenly Father” for what they didn't get from their earthly fathers. 227 "The Father," then, to Promise Keepers, meets an emotional need.

Related to how PK visualizes the sacred is who PK suggests can be in the image of God, and who can be in the image of Christ. First, the Study Bible asserts that “all people ... have been created in God's image and deserve the dignity of that position,” and that every human was “created a noble creature and given a high calling.” And a commentator cautions that men are not Godlike “in terms of his all-encompassing wisdom and power” but rather “in terms of his ability to reason, think, and feel – and even to be creative.” 228 But other aspects of PK's message counter these caveats. God – being sexed male and being “Father” – also excludes the female. Moreover, the entire point of PK's message is that God is a promise keeper and represents what men can become. The Study Bible describes this aspect of God, uses graphic icons to mark promises God has made and kept, and indexes those promises as well. 229 God, then, is Creator, Father, the true Promise Keeper. PK's approach to the image of Christ is more pointedly exclusive. Although PK does not explicitly say so, the suggestion from the writings is that only men can be in the image of Jesus. Smalley and Trent describe “the key ingredients of biblical manhood” as

226 “Man to Man,” Study Bible, xxi-xxii.
229 The Bible commentators describe God's role as a promise keeper immediately, in Genesis. See “Genesis: At a Glance,” 1.
embodied by Jesus and as “ever-present” in all men.\textsuperscript{230} Some writers also say Jesus “became flesh to identify with us,” that he has experienced all the temptations that a man faces.\textsuperscript{231} Certainly PK does not say, in any of the writings surveyed, that women can be in the image of Christ. As Rebecca Merrill Groothius and Douglas Groothius have observed, the PK image of Jesus does not embody full humanness – only a specific male humanness.\textsuperscript{232}

The message, then, from PK’s portrayal of the Trinity is that, as Bryan W. Brickner argues, “femininity” is subordinated “to something less than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” something “less than divine.”\textsuperscript{233} A man or boy can look at God and Jesus and find his ideal self; but where is a woman or girl to look? In PK’s ideal order, Mary Daly’s observation is apt: A woman has access to the divine, to salvation, “only through the male.”\textsuperscript{234} With Promise Keepers’ theology, the woman must reach the sacred either through her husband the “servant leader,” the spiritual leader and priest of the home, or through a risen Christ who, even in non-earthly form, is still deemed male.

Some people might impatiently dismiss as esoteric such objections to how God is characterized. However, as Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman observe, God language has “practical consequences.” For one, such symbols legitimate male authority. Daly argues, “The idea of a unique male savior may be seen as one more legitimation of male superiority.” Second, the symbols legitimate a male norm and an attendant array of Others. Judith Plaskow notes that religious symbols create a “double reference ... up and down” – symbols that “claim to tell us about the divine

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{230} Smalley and Trent, “The Promises You Make to Yourself,” \textit{What Makes a Man}, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{231} Raleigh Washington, Glen Kehrein, Claude V. King, “Help Me Understand,” \textit{Seven Promises} 1999, 163.
\item \textsuperscript{232} See “Women Keep Promises, Too!”, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{233} Bryan W. Brickner, \textit{The Promise Keepers: Politics and Promises} (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999), 86, 99.
\end{itemize}
nature, and they justify a human community that reserves power and authority to men.” She adds, “A community that sees ‘man’ as created in God’s image and sees God as male, will have maleness as its norm. Female is Other, excluded and subordinated.” In PK’s universe, the “Other” is also a gay male.

We have seen how some women can draw God closer to themselves in ways perhaps unanticipated by PK’s teachings – as Lyndi McCartney did in establishing her “love relationship” with Jesus. It does not appear to matter to her that a male figure is her gateway to spiritual empowerment. Her bottom line is that her life has changed dramatically: She has strength and dignity. But there also will be girls and women who, in hearing PK’s teachings, see sufficient evidence to view themselves as lesser beings. As for gay men and boys, they are welcomed only if celibate, and thus are asked to shut off and view as evil what may be a core part of themselves; lesbian women would be viewed similarly. The consequences of Othering such as PK’s are not solely inner; they manifest in daily events including efforts supported by the Christian Right to “convert” gay men and women by psychotherapy, and discrimination and violence – rates of which increased after Colorado’s passage of Amendment 2, a provision advocated by Bill McCartney that denied gay and bisexual people certain legal remedies to discrimination.

The third major potential consequence of God language is what Daly calls “Christolatry.” What is worshiped, she argues, is maleness. The image of the

---

234 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, 77.
235 Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman 145; Daly, Beyond God the Father, 71; Plaskow 127.
236 Brasher comments on the “heterosexual mandate” evident in the congregations she studies; women there call homosexuality “evil” and a “sin,” and some refuse to associate with gay women (138-9).
"God-Man," she argues, "functions to glorify maleness."\textsuperscript{239} Consider the symbolism of "God" for the Western world, as Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman describe it:

As an ultimate point of reference for all that is (and, indeed, is not), the term seeks to gather up, comprehend, and hold together in a meaningful interconnection that can orient human life, all reality and experience, all possibilities and imaginings — intentions surely transcending human capabilities of knowing, conceiving, or imagining.\textsuperscript{240}

Bill McCartney notes that as Promise Keepers, men’s "ultimate goal" is to be “'conformed to the likeness of his Son' (Rom. 2:9).” Edwin Louis Cole asserts that “Adam was created in the image of God, including His moral likeness (see Gen. 1:26-27). God invested Himself in Adam.” And Leighton Ford exhorts, "God Himself is a promise keeper and you and I were made to be like Him."\textsuperscript{241}

With Promise Keepers' theology, emulation of God and Christ may come dangerously close to self-idolatry when it appropriates, solely for men, traits that the ideal being is deemed to have, and then makes most of the male population ineligible by excluding noncelibate gay men and all non-Christian men. Further, the pervasive atmosphere in PK of cheering men and maleness; of an exclusive brotherhood or priesthood; of men as chosen by God to bring revival to the world; of men as earthly saviors and creators, as in the image of God, He who is “the central object of worship and the ultimate court of appeal”\textsuperscript{242} — all these, as well as the depiction of the holy as male, suggest that PK’s theology worships maleness as much as it does the Creator. Though humans do use familiar terms to describe the Ultimate, there is perhaps a

\textsuperscript{239} Daly, Beyond God the Father, 72.
\textsuperscript{240} Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman, 153.
\textsuperscript{242} Schussler Fiorenza and Kaufman, 137.
self-referential quality in a writer’s describing God as the ultimate “Coach,” one “we” carry off the field in final victory, when the writer himself (McCartney) is Coach and the cover of one of his books shows his players carrying him off the field. 243

PK’s central definition of sin is, of course, inextricably linked to submission and obedience to God. With the framing of sin in God’s Eden as an irresponsible choice, nonconformists can be blamed for “choosing to sin,” and “redemption” becomes a matter of individual will power. Thus the definition legitimates certain structures of power and makes questioning those structures a potential sin, itself. The definition of sin also argues for overriding one’s intuition and instincts and perhaps one’s own self – “self” being a problematic notion that will be addressed later in this chapter, for self can be made and remade. As already discussed, the Study Bible defines sin explicitly in its discussion of the Fall and of Job: Sin is following one’s own understanding, not God’s. “God encourages us to question and search his will; he created us with the ability to do so. But if, at the end of our search, our logic is not satisfied, we must bow our heads at his feet, not shake our fists in his face.” 244

With Job, the commentator notes “the deeply troubling and difficult” nature of such suffering when it is borne by someone who is earnestly trying to do God’s will. The commentator then explores, briefly, five scriptural explanations for the suffering of good people: “To develop character. ... To demonstrate the nature of our character. ... To allow God to demonstrate the strength he makes available to us. ... To test us. ... To discipline and correct us. ...” 245 In the last, he cites Heb. 12:4-11, the same passage cited by Lyndi McCartney in her explanation of how she trusted that she

---

243 See the cover of From Ashes to Glory and McCartney’s description of God as “Coach” in “My Father’s Team and the Game of Life,” Sold Out, xxv-xxix. Quoted material is on xxix.
244 The Job discussion is in the Study Bible, 549.
needed God's training and discipline to teach her not to idolize her husband. Such
lessons in humility and brokenness are classic in traditional conservative
evangelicalism, David Harrington Watt finds: Humans typically resist or rebel
against submitting their wills to God's, yet "for their souls to be saved their wills had
to be broken." 246 1Peter, the epistle that is so often pointed to as mandating female
submission, is noted by the Bible commentator as being frequently called "the Job of
the New Testament because it stresses suffering and submission to God's sovereign
will." 247

Within structures of male dominance, PK's definition of sin and advocacy of
brokenness are likely to have different effects on men and women, normative and not.
While Bill McCartney may write of "joyfully endur(ing) persecution for the sake of
righteousness," 248 his wife's experience shows that a woman's brokenness within an
abusive and neglectful marriage looks significantly different from the brokenness of a
man whose "submission" is, at base, owed only to God and who need not rely on a
spouse for his financial — and perhaps emotional — support. In an observation that
remains true for many today, Valerie Saiving noted in 1960 that women are
conditioned to view their self-assertion, ambition, and pride as sin, and redemption
from sin as coming in the form of self-sacrifice. Biblical interpretation paired with
social conditioning can teach women self-abnegation to the point of self-effacement. 249

246 Watt, 125. For examples from PK writers, see Crawford Loritts, "Godly Men: Hope for Our Times," Seven Promises,
247 The commentators also discuss the "key principle" of 1 Peter: "As people who have the hope of salvation, we are
called to a lifestyle of submission and service and are encouraged to see suffering as part of a growth process as we follow
in Christ's steps. ... Christ's example of suffering sinlessly, silently and as our substitute is a model for us to follow"
("1Peter: At a Glance," 1380).
249 Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," a 1960 article reprinted in Womanspirit Rising. See
especially pages 35-39.
Women, children, and the “spiritual leaders” themselves may be taught that it is right always to put others’ needs before their own, as PK teaches, a principle that can set up a shell game of needs hushed, hidden, and denied, so that deception and guesswork become the norm. Where the spiritual leader himself is concerned, denying his own needs risks simply putting him back into the role of hero who “sucks it up,” a blueprint for burnout, disillusionment, and anger.

Similarly, consider the “sin of resentment” and its antidote, forgiveness. A person – male or female but more likely the latter – who keeps trying to release resentment may miss the ability of resentment to spur action, to challenge patterns of racial or sexual or economic oppression, perhaps for sheer survival. If “anger is an ever-present emotion in a black man,” as Rodney Cooper writes in the 1999 Seven Promises, but resentment is a sin, then is there an aspect of the PK ministry that seeks to neutralize black resistance to racial injustice?

PK’s other central aspect of “sin” – following one’s own understanding and not God’s Word – compounds the problems raised by suffering and brokenness, resentment and forgiveness. It also is inextricably linked to PK’s emphasis on submission as an empty vessel to God, and to PK’s use of psychological concepts for making and remaking selves.

---

250 “Marriage 101,” Study Bible, 1300.
251 Phillip Porter and Gordon England, “Taking the Next Step,” Seven Promises 1999, 194. This essay is in the context of what PK calls “racial reconciliation” between “brothers.” It tells men who have power by virtue of their race or their economic position to extend a helping and mentoring hand to an “ethnic brother” and to ask his forgiveness. The offended person should obey Jesus and forgive (193-4). In the same volume, Max Lucado urges men to “act lovingly” toward people who have hurt them, because Christ mandates it (“The Greatest Power Ever Known,” 209).
PK teaches that people should distrust “the heart” — the “thinking, feeling, willing process” which “is deceitful above all things,” according to Jer. 17:9. Men must be watchful and self-controlled, since “just a small deviation from God’s standard can put us at risk and lead us far afield from our desired destination.” People should instead listen to God’s Word and the movings of the Holy Spirit. This aspect of the theology does leave room for maneuvering: Feeling, intuition, and instinct could be labeled as movings of “the Spirit.” Again, however, one’s understanding of “the Spirit” will be conditioned by what the person is taught to view as right or wrong. Though a sexual feeling or instinct is easy enough to assess, a prompting of unease may be defined as evil. Instinct helps to keep animals alive — and humans are animals. Instinct, of course, is not only animalistic, it also has been shorthand for “woman,” for Eve, for a trait or behavior that must be tamed.

PK emphasizes that men should submit as “an empty vessel” to God. Bill McCartney emphasizes this concept, “dying to self,” as do the Bible commentators in discussing the “kenosis” passage of Phil. 2:5-11, in which Jesus is portrayed “as a model of other-centered humility” who emptied himself of divine traits so that he could become incarnate. Aside from the question of whether some PK writers think they possess divine traits, the concept of self-emptying carries mixed implications — and probably does not suggest that humans can “empty” themselves completely. Nonetheless, there can be a satisfaction, a joy, a transcendence, in opening to and being filled by the holy. There also can be an erasure, a squelching, a remaking of one

---


254 Ruether, for example, argues that since classical times, men have been identified with intellectuality and women with its opposite. See “Motherearth and the Megamachine,” in Womanspirit Rising, 44.

self into another, more normative, self. Changing behavior is, of course, one purpose of ideals. But in PK's case, this remaking is the task not only of religion but also of “the ‘psychological’ ” – combining two of society’s most powerful means of defining others and thinking about one’s self, or, in other words, two of society’s most potent forces of “morality” and social control. Who has the authority to make a self? Who has the power to define what a normal, godly, self is, and to suggest ways in which those selves will be constructed?

Conservative evangelicals began to adopt the use of psychological thought in the decade after World War II.256 Promise Keepers’ use of psychology involves not only its advocacy of marital counseling and its publishing of mass media items, such as books and videos, but also the small groups and mentoring relationships in which PK asks men to confess to and monitor one another. Self-surveillance and self-control are driven downward, outside the offices of any psychological professional. A preponderance of main PK writers are trained psychologists, such as James Dobson, or ministers whose work involves counseling. The writers of PK’s primary text, Seven Promises 1999, are a case in point. Of the 25 – who, it should be recalled, crafted the images of emotionally shaky women detailed in Chapter 3 – seven are ministers or evangelists and probably provide pastoral counseling as well, and five have explicitly stated backgrounds in psychology. They and others listed also write advice and motivational books. This marked inclusion of and emphasis on “therapy talk” has been a core element of PK since its early days. Its 1992 book, What Makes a Man?, is glued together by 13 thematic essays by Gary Smalley and John Trent, writers of popular evangelical self-help and family guides.

256 Watt, A Transforming Faith, 142-3.
The collections are peppered with promises to be made, checklists, and yardsticks for men seeking to be godly, as well as insights about humans' essential natures, about “dysfunctional, abusive or non-loving parents;” a psychiatrist’s view of “our four basic needs as human beings;” “five marks of masculinity” — the ones that “set a man apart as a man” — as well as ways to rate one’s marriage and “Five Secrets of a Happy Marriage.” 257 And, of course, there is the checklist of ways for a man to develop the “appropriate self-confidence” and “healthy independence” that give his wife “the security to allow her husband to lead the family.” 258 Writers urge men to make peace with their past, recognize where their “personal emotional wounds” from childhood may trip them up, and even to get counseling (“Big boys do cry, and crying is very healthy”). 259

In its widespread use of psychological concepts, PK adopts what Nancy Schnog describes as a twentieth century, middle-class method of conceiving of, understanding, and performing the self. There is no innate “human nature,” she and Joel Pfister argue. Rather, “emotional truths,” self-identity, and understandings of selves are constructed and, moreover, they are constructed partly by “the ‘psychological,’ ” or mainstream concepts of psychoanalysis as articulated and disseminated in various ways, including not only professional institutions and outlets but also popular culture. 260 These understandings include why people act, feel, and think the way they do, and how they should act, think, and feel, including within their relationships. Such understandings become not only hegemonic but also useful for

258 This, too, is by Smalley and Trent (“The Promises You Make to Your Wife,” What Makes a Man, 68).
creating and maintaining power, Pfister argues: They “become commonsensical and thus, powerful – even powerfully invisible – in their influence.” Accordingly, it is important to consider what he calls this “cultural machinery of selfing”: “Why and how... particular sorts of ‘selves’ (are) sold as real or desirable or stable or normal ... and who benefits from the proliferation of these ‘psychological’ ideologies.”

He notes that dominant groups have a history of using purported “human nature” “to sanction their oppression of others”:

It may be politically advantageous... for those who hold power to assign bodies “psychological” characteristics if the subordinated occupants of those social bodies (women in various groups, African Americans, immigrants) come to accept ideological ascriptions of “psychological” determinism as naturally emerging from within them. To borrow [Joan] Scott’s phrasing, they can be taught to read their prescribed “psychological” essence as “sure and fixed, outside of human construction.”

Psychological concepts were used beginning in the late nineteenth century to redefine people who engaged in same-sex sex into people with a homosexual identity, one that was “sick” and required analysis and treatment, he notes. And women have tended to be characterized as “hyperpsychological humans who are ‘naturally’ saturated with and determined by emotions in need of control and interpretation.” Similarly, Rickie Solinger argues that psychiatry in the post-World War II era “was used to support the postwar family agenda,” which reflected “concern that women were...
aggressively undermining male prerogatives,” and “argued that a real woman lived to fulfill her destiny as a wife and childbearer.”  

The writings of PK’s psychological professionals suggest a similar project. In PK’s hybrid language of religion and psychology, the advocacy of being “an empty vessel” to be filled by (a defined) God/Jesus/Holy Spirit takes on a certain ability to function as a tool of “selfing” and naming. The concept of “redemption” from “sin” works with this concept, because a person is redeemed to a norm. As single, “repentant,” pregnant girls were “redeemed” to a norm in the postwar years, so can nonconformists be redeemed from “sin” as defined by PK’s theology.

Clearly the implications for people who do not fit such narrowly defined norms can be serious. Psychological professions, Schnog argues, have the power “to naturalize oppressive standards of social adjustment, to perpetuate social inequalities, to legitimate dangerously personalized visions of pain, and to speak, for better or worse, to widespread needs for self-disclosure and solace.” Mary Daly puts a finer point on it:

Psychiatry and psychology have their own creeds, priesthood, spiritual counseling, rules, anathemas, and jargon. Their power of psychological intimidation is enormous. Millions who might smile at being labeled “heretic” or “sinful” for refusing to conform to the norms of sexist society can be cowed and kept in line by the labels “sick,” “neurotic,” or “unfeminine.”

With Promise Keepers, a similar effect can be true for both men and women who refuse to fit, or cannot fit, PK ideals. The pressure to be viewed as godly, by others or by self, can be enormous. As for women, it is true that PK’s primary aim is to change

---

men's behavior — but it also seeks, indirectly, to change women's, no matter what the organization says ("We're not even addressing women," one PK spokesman has protested267). Masculinity and femininity are inseparable constructs, especially in a heterosexual family system that mandates roles based on biology.

Lyndi McCartney's experiences, and scholars' research, have suggested that a wife's submission to her husband is quite varied in actual practice and that a wife's willingness to "submit" or "follow" provides her with significant power and leverage. Judith Stacey, however, is concerned about the power of the "whole institutional nexus" that accompanies the doctrine of submission — including congregational norms and perhaps Christian counseling — to gradually neutralize the "nontraditional" views of self and the world held by women who have acceded to men's "leadership" partly out of desire or need for a stable economic and family life.268 Brenda Brasher and Marie Griffith do find a willingness to express "traditional" standards for women, not just men, in congregations and to in some way marginalize women who do not fit them.269 In addition, PK's advocacy of men as primary teachers of Scriptural interpretation suggest that a woman or girl might become educated to view herself as not only dependent on a man but also as innately more emotional, as inherently susceptible to evil influences, as requiring constant monitoring by herself and perhaps others. Particularly in the context of "the 'psychological,'" then, whether "servant leadership" and "submission" are simply innocuous ideas becomes a

266 Daly, Beyond God the Father, 4.
267 See the comments by spokesman Mark DeMoss in The Boston Globe (Leonard, "Men With Promises to Keep," 2).
268 Stacey, Brave New Families, 53-60, especially 60.
269 Brasher's discussion of varied venues of "submission" is in Godly Women, 148. She finds acceptance according to conformity with familial order (129-30), an "enforced heterosexuality" (138), and an emphasis on men as breadwinner, with women "pitted" for "having" to work outside the home (162). Griffith, in God's Daughters, finds that to receive support of the Aglow group, women must be willing to relate their lives according to a script of "transformation and healing" or risk being defined as "rebellious, sinful, and miserable" (201).
compelling question – because, as Joel Pfister observes, “The language you use also uses you.”

It is also true that language victimizes partly according to one’s ability or inability to resist – and to how one’s communities of support define words and craft alternative meanings. So while Promise Keepers writers may define as humiliating submission to a power other than one sexed male, conservative religious women have redefined it to empower themselves, to connect or reconnect them to the sacred, and to resist victimization. Lyndi McCartney, her woman friend, and many others advocate mutual submission of spouses before God. One of Stacey’s research subjects uses the ideology of headship to gain “substantial improvements” in her husband’s behavior – to “reform her husband in her own image.”

This chapter has shown how the Promise Keepers theology naturalizes heterosexual male dominance, not only with biblical interpretation but also with modern psychological teachings. PK, then, uses two enormously powerful tools to support its claims to power. Nonetheless, the research of Brasher, Griffith, and Stacey suggests that servant leadership and submission can at times improve people’s lives. Given the power of naming, “selfing,” and “the ‘psychological,’” however, servant leadership and submission carry risks to what Christ and Plaskow call “full human dignity.” These risks apply most to people who do not freely choose to live within a patriarchal religious structure, who are not empowered by it to grow fully, who do not find that it helps them, in some important way, to connect to their sense of the sacred. As the Conclusion to this thesis notes, the notion of “choosing” to live within patriarchy is problematic, because, as Stacey shows, certain women

---

271 Stacey, In the Name of the Family, 23-4.
choose it as a “postfeminist survival strategy” — not “a simple retreat from feminism” but a “blending and adapting (of) certain feminist ideas to traditional and modern family and work strategies.”272 The need for such strategies — and the existence of and support for Promise Keepers — suggest larger problems in U.S. society and institutions that privilege certain men over all others.

---

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined what is only a narrow swath of a complex movement: aspects of its prescriptive literature, and the self-reported experiences of two interested parties. The thesis is critical because of my concern with power and its abuses, and will not necessarily reflect how men, women, and children actually understand and use PK's theology. Still, a compelling message that has emerged is a strong interest by PK writers in power – in perpetuating and validating male dominance, in ways overt and subtle, despite the ministry's claims that it seeks only to humbly serve. An equally strong message is that women can simultaneously resist and support such assertions. This Conclusion considers the "patriarchal bargain" that women may make in the interest of family stability, the lack of checks and balances in PK's system, men's "chosenness," and the erosion of women's integrity that may result from that chosenness.

As we have seen, PK offers men a blueprint for balancing work, family, self, faith, and friends, and it offers a Father God who is accessible, welcoming, and forgiving. All these may be especially welcome as men hit middle age and parenting years, which can bring modern culture's problems into uncomfortably sharp focus. Likewise, women can benefit from PK's concepts of responsibility and service. It can provide "moral and psychological leverage," as Margaret Lamberts Bendroth finds with female submission in the 1950s.\(^\text{273}\) As well, living in a male-headed family and

\(^{273}\) Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 113.
“following” a husband’s “servant leadership” may be natural and desirable to certain women. Scholars have shown the concerns of conservative religious women, who reject what they see as secular society’s, and mainstream feminism’s, sexual pressures on women and devaluation of “traditional” womanly roles, and see marriage and motherhood as ways in which they can be guaranteed respect—and space to experience the sacred in their way. “Submission” may be part of that package, especially when the ideal of “servant leadership” might prompt men out of their confusion about what God wants them to do.274

However, as Stacey has argued, economic structures can pressure women to make a patriarchal bargain as part of their “postfeminist survival strategies.” 275 Whether a woman is working class or middle class, her support of a ministry like Promise Keepers, and her decision to “follow” her husband’s “servant leadership,” may be as much a function of economic need as spiritual conviction—or more so. To some women, comments like the following by Coach McCartney may be outrageous, and may make PK unacceptable:

God doesn’t appraise my worth by my won-lost record. Victory in His eyes is the happy bounce in Lyndi’s step. Integrity in His eyes is the self-assured, contented smile on her face. God measures my character in the secure, affirmed countenances of my children—and of my children’s children. God weighs my righteousness not in the hours spent at work, but on the scales of my daily fellowship with Him.276

---

274 Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 126, refers to men’s passivity due to confusion about their prerogatives. Evangelicals offered a Chicago Declaration in 1973 with a “feminist plank” that said “we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity,” (and) calling both sexes to “mutual submission and active discipleship” (122). PK writer Howard Hendricks echoes this idea, citing a 1979 book called Passive Men, Wild Women, in which author Pierre Mornell described husbands whose withdrawn approach at home drove their wives “crazy” (“A Mandate for Mentoring,” Seven Promises, 1999, 33). Smalley and Trent also cite it (“The Promises You Make to Yourself,” What Makes a Man, 41). This is not a new problem; in the 1940s, a Presbyterian minister, Donald Grey Barnhouse, who advocated female submission as a cure for what Randall Balmer calls male “spiritual complacency.” “American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity,” 53-54.


But to other women, PK’s standards for male behavior may make the annoyance of such rhetoric relatively easy to tolerate. Similar dynamics may apply in rural, lower-income areas, where as Susan Wise Bauer has observed, men may spend little time with their families and barely view their wives as people, let alone as equals with their own full identity and dignity. In such a context, “five steps for a happy marriage” can be welcome. 277

Given that PK affords all formal power to men, and that this creates significant potential costs to women whether they do or do not agree to this quid pro quo relationship, one has to ask what structures are in place to guarantee women’s integrity. There are none. Men’s responsibility in this system depends to some degree on their accountability to congregations and the small groups that PK advocates. Likewise, women’s empowerment depends in part on their feeling justified in crafting, and exercising, nontraditional definitions of “submission” and “following” — a sense of justification that may be formed in community,278 as was Lyndi McCartney’s, but without (or even with) that support, can be all too shaky given various forms of denigrating things female. In a society where women’s economic subordination is institutionalized by wage, health-care, child-care, and legal structures, and where women therefore are too often held hostage to the provisions of a kindly husband, the

---

277 Personal conversation, July 2000. Bauer, who has a master’s of divinity degree and ministers to a congregation with her husband, the Rev. Pete Bauer, speaks of her experiences in Charles City County, Virginia. They are consistent with my observations as a teen-ager in a small Kentucky town.

278 Plaskow observes that second-wave feminists “experienced community as the source of our liberation” (76) and notes the importance of community to selfing and spirituality. Brasher and Griffith also focus on women’s community as spiritual support and empowerment – according to familial norms. And, of course, PK adopts a mix of feminist consciousness-raising and 12-Step techniques.
dynamics of power continue to be asymmetrical, both within and without a “servant leader” family structure.\textsuperscript{279}

A rhetoric of male servant leadership – such as Promise Keepers’ – that does not consistently articulate limits on male authority can therefore be dangerous. PK’s framework is one that includes harsh criticism of “feminization,” images of female weakness, and aggressive assertions of male leadership and authority. PK does not consistently remind men that women are full beings in themselves, not dependent on men for their identity. PK makes no explicit, high-profile commitment to the concept that female is equal to male – morally and otherwise. I have found one explicit assertion that woman is the equal and “equal partner” of man, in the speech by Tony Evans at Stand in the Gap. The Bible commentators make one, vague, reference to equality – in the character profile of Mary, who “knew what to treasure,” and who knew the Son’s message of “salvation, equality and social justice.”\textsuperscript{280} What PK does emphasize is a unity of men. A unity of brothers and sisters in Christ is not a theme or a priority.\textsuperscript{281} PK makes no commitment to “reconciliation” with women for their suffering from sexism, as Rebecca Merrill Groothius and Douglas Groothius have observed. If doing so would be a risk, PK could take it: With Bill McCartney’s advocacy, PK did so with its “racial reconciliation” plank, and withstood the controversy that resulted.\textsuperscript{282}

If a “servant leader” does not truly view himself as being on the same footing as his wife – and indeed the term “servant leader” itself suggests innate superiority –

\textsuperscript{279} “Asymmetrical” is a concept used by both Stacey and Plaskow in their discussions of power in heterosexual arrangements, whether economic, social, or religious. See Plaskow 130-1; Stacey, \textit{In the Name of the Family}, 66.
\textsuperscript{280} “Mary: She Knew What to Treasure,” Study Bible, 1119.
then exchange is not equal, and mutuality is not true: He, the dominant party, has the trump card. In theory, submission by both sexes is willing. In practice, a woman may have to submit for material reasons; a man need not stick with the PK program. Moreover, the PK doctrine shows that he need not “submit”; he leads, with a little bending, a little compromising. If he views himself as “chosen” by God, he may have trouble experiencing humility, and respecting and loving his spouse for what she is. She may go to Jesus for her “love relationship” – which, again, may be all she wishes, or may be all that she tries to wish. But if she is in the relationship more for economic stability, then spiritual give-and-take may be moot.

In its rhetoric, PK at minimum does not enforce a consistent editorial voice, or it deliberately employs a variety of voices to respect the range of adherents’ beliefs and to attract a variety of supporters for the cause it views as so urgent. As well, advocating men’s “submission” to women would undermine the movement. Traditionalists could read such a plank as disobeying God’s will as expressed in Eden. They and others could express a general masculine aversion to being subordinated to anything female. The concept of servant leadership, rather, is malleable enough to accommodate various constituencies. Speaking not of male submission but of male service – as God’s mandate – creates a safety net that allows PK to advocate men’s meeting marital and social responsibilities, and even to respond to women’s demands, without being humbled, lowered, or subordinated to a woman. But these gaps make it too easy for a man to default to modes of thinking that favor his own authority and power – even “loving” power.

In fact, in certain ways PK’s theology demands very little sacrifice of men. They submit to friendly male authority. They yield to a vision of a rugged lifestyle that eases the pressures of emotional isolation, of chasing financial success, of
perhaps uncontrolled, illicit, sexual desire, and of too many choices. They take on the second shift with their wives. (It is curious that the role of “biblical leadership” is needed to persuade men to do so, as Tony Evans preached at Stand in the Gap.) The wife, in return for her husband’s stated intent to carry a second job – as she probably always has – relinquishes claim to full self-identity. In some ways what PK asks of men is little different from what has long been demanded of women. They have long been blamed for family problems, as the “smothering” and “domineering” mother tropes can attest. At least PK does argue for some level of parity in domestic responsibilities and shouldering of blame if the children turn out “wrong.”

To be fair, PK also makes unrealistic demands of men: that a man be responsible for the happiness and complete well-being of all in his household. It advises, for example, that a man lay aside any desire for solitude after a hard day at work and instead be the father that God wants him to be – giving his wife and children all the attention they want, and setting aside his own needs and desires. It also tells a man to serve without end; to stay in a bad marriage where he may be miserable and even subject to abuse; and to do the same with a job. Perhaps this is PK’s effort to curb what it may see as men’s natural aggression.

Nonetheless, with Promise Keepers, men receive a payoff: They are chosen. The whole essence of the ministry is that men are highly significant – indeed, crucial. To Judith Plaskow, chosenness in Judaism is generally viewed in terms of “responsibilities and duties,” not “merit or attributes,” and “election is marked by suffering, not by exaltation.” The chosen know their lot, and they are “grateful” because “the burden... is a boon and privilege others do not share;” “their special

---

destiny is God’s unique choice, not one path among many." 284 To PK, the task is to serve, to suffer, to save; unlike Plaskow’s framework, men are deemed born to lead because of innate traits, though their hope of glory is, indeed, not earthly but in the afterlife. To Plaskow, if some are chosen, others are unworthy. She argues that chosenness does not necessarily create Others; rather, the two concepts work together, with other ideas, to create differentiation and hierarchies. But in PK’s universe, the concept of Othering is so crucial and so related to men’s chosenness that it is worth revisiting Simone de Beauvoir’s classic formula: “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. ... She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” 285 To PK, woman is not an autonomous being, but she is essential. God created man and woman for each other. Man needs someone to lead and serve, and someone to follow him – someone to whom he does not submit.

Men’s chosenness damn PK’s claims to humility. The Bible commentators say God wants all people “to serve him ‘shoulder to shoulder,’” 286 together, and says “the proud and arrogant will be removed and the humble and meek who trust in God’s name will be preserved.” He “wants followers to become characterized by humility and trust in him.” 286 In fact, the first sentence by PK in its Men’s Study Bible says “humility is the number one trait of a godly man.” But the noblesse oblige in PK’s other rhetoric, and the frequent tone of its portrayals of women, do not mesh with its assertions that men should humbly view others as better than themselves, view their

284 Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 97-98.
wives as God's gift to them, and even learn from their wives' good examples.\textsuperscript{287} PK's humility is a selective humility: The man is center of the earthly universe. Man becomes creator of wife and family; family creates church, community, city, state, nation, and world. Man – a Promise Keepers man – makes a “difference that no one else could possibly make.”\textsuperscript{288} Because man is part of a male elite that interprets and ultimately enforces the sacred texts and rules for living to all in his household, he is the gateway for others' spiritual identities and, by extension, their sense of themselves and others. He is God’s mediator, the Father and Savior on Earth. The Promise Keeper, then, is a paean to individuality, as the Rev. Pete Bauer has observed: His wife and children are reflections of himself.\textsuperscript{289} Too often, PK expresses an idolatry of the self and a dependency of women and children that can, as Lyndi McCartney’s life shows, be devastating.

For all the esteem accorded to individual men, the ultimate might be accorded to the founders of PK – Bill McCartney and Dave Wardell – and the others who helped to craft, and teach, PK's theology. They say they are pleased to have been tools for “God’s movement among men today,” and to be revealing “the kind of man Almighty God wants you to be.”\textsuperscript{290} McCartney asks, in reflecting on his tale of sin and neglect that preceded the beginnings of PK: “Who could have predicted that from this imbalanced picture of modern manhood God was setting the stage for radical changes? And not just for me – for an entire nation of men.”\textsuperscript{291} Some say they are

\textsuperscript{287} In the Study Bible, Phil 2:3, 275; “Gen. 2:18: Not Good?,” 5; and Getz, “Abigail,” 5.
\textsuperscript{288} McCartney, “A Call to Unity,” \textit{Seven Promises} 1999, 156.
\textsuperscript{289} Personal conversation with the Rev. Pete Bauer of Charles City County, Virginia, July 2000. Bauer was speaking of his experiences with Promise Keepers’ small groups – which he said tended to focus on sports, not on godliness.
\textsuperscript{290} The “God’s movement” assertion is in the Introduction to the Study Bible, xi. See also “It’s Time for Men to Take a Stand,” McCartney, \textit{What Makes a Man}, 1992, 13.
\textsuperscript{291} McCartney, “All That Glitters is Not Gold,” \textit{Sold Out}, 114.
certain that obeying God's Word – as revealed by PK – will ensure their salvation.

Said one writer of another man, "I hope I see him in heaven." 292

It is possible that Promise Keepers' portrayal of women fits a paradigm articulated by John Stratton Hawley and Wayne Proudfoot: That masculine fundamentalisms, in eras of social change, have used women as "a fine canvas on which to project feelings of general besetment." 293 That possibility leads to a host of questions for further study, particularly in how men actually understand and use its teachings: how PK's influence affects power relations in homes, churches, government, and even in the workplace; implications it may have for the human rights of gay people; and how PK's ministry may reflect middle-class aspirations and norms of whiteness and respectability. Most immediately relevant is how men's race, class, and military backgrounds, as well as their current environments, might affect their rhetoric and beliefs. Some of the most aggressive comments cited in this thesis are by Bill McCartney – a white, working-class son of an ex-Marine – and by Tony Evans and Wellington Boone, two African-American ministers who work in cities, Dallas and Richmond, respectively. McCartney refers to what he calls his "thousand secret insecurities."294 Boone was an out-of-wedlock child who "learned to survive on the streets" of a "New Jersey ghetto."295 Evans, with his ministry The Urban Alternative, expresses concern about crime and the rates of black men in prisons. Further research should ask to what degree might Judith Stacey's observation hold true: "Male breadwinning and marriage are becoming interactive badges of race and class status," as white working-class men see the erosion of whatever breadwinner

293 Hawley and Proudfoot, introduction to Fundamentalism and Gender, 27. The context is Hindu fundamentalism – but the images and rhetoric in PK writings and speeches appear to fit the paradigm.
esteem they had, and fewer and fewer black men are neither in prison nor unemployed. 296

By replacing the increasingly unrealistic “financial breadwinner” with the “spiritual breadwinner” chosen by God, PK restores a man’s primacy, even in evangelical families where mutuality is typical. If he is deemed responsible for the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of all in his household, then the man can recover some level of pride and hope of greatness – even while he claims to reject a desire for power and greatness and to invert notions of what greatness is. If he “leads” and his wife “follows,” even in name only, he gains a mark of respectability and privilege, especially in a society that puts a premium on “families.”

This thesis has tried to balance respect for Promise Keepers’ faith and yearnings with a critical examination of the ministry’s theology and expressions. The tone of superiority or entitlement in PK’s texts and speeches should not obscure the value of other parts of its message. Certain writers emphasize friendship, openness and understanding, mutuality, dignity, and shared respect as well as the importance of listening to, rather than simply humoring, another.297 PK can provide important support and instruction for men who sincerely wish to change their lives to a more spiritual and responsible tenor.

But PK invites criticism because it asserts norms that can have concrete, negative, implications for how people see themselves and their authority, and thus how power is distributed within – and outside – families. PK establishes a hierarchy of favored, “godly,” groups – and “ungodly” groups; it does not articulate firm and

296 Stacey, In the Name of the Family, 73.
consistent limits on heterosexual male power; and it does not mandate a bottom line of respect for the “full human dignity” of wives, of children, and all people who do not fit its ideals. PK’s theology and its tools of “selfing” are profoundly disrespectful of humans’ ability to make their own selves according to their own minds, consciences, and sense of the calling of the sacred – if they believe in “the sacred” at all. More specifically, the relationship of “servant leader” and “follower” as formally articulated by PK does not encourage wives and husbands to determine their own preferences, priorities, and dreams – and to reach for them. He is her spiritual gateway; her well-being depends on him, as does, in the end, his on her. Each is bound to the other; each is responsible for the other’s happiness and salvation.

Holding one adult responsible for the happiness and fulfillment of others – especially other adults – is onerous and unfair. It sets people up for precisely the ailment that some PK writers condemn: “codependence,” an overreliance on the approval and well-being of others. It can perpetuate men’s delusions of grandeur and self-importance – or guilt and burnout, or blaming wife and family for their ingratitude at all the man has sacrificed for them. It can endorse controlling behavior and perpetuate whatever manipulation comes with female “following” or “submission.” It can – to use Judith Plaskow’s framework – cause people to censor themselves, to forget “pieces of themselves,” and thus cause “spiritual injury.” And it is a shackling of two people together in God’s name. Perhaps men will find spiritual empowerment and relief in their servant leader tasks as certain women do in

\[298\] My discussion about freedom to create one’s self is based in Plaskow’s criticism of “God as dominating other,” *Standing Again at Sinai*, 130-131. Plaskow asserts that the concept of a dominating, all-powerful God creates a “profoundly asymmetrical” equation between God and humans, in which humans are forced to “concede their limits” rather than be accorded the ability to “develop autonomy and self-reliance.” That criticism can apply to PK’s theology – because to PK, humans have no real choice but to submit, and because PK posits heterosexual men as the proxy for God/Jesus on Earth.

submission. Certainly there can be release and grace in this obedience to one’s understanding of God’s will, in the work of self-mastery as spiritual practice. But because such a system chooses roles based on anatomy, and serves those who are willing to be “good” women and men while damning those who are not, it is important to assess who defines “God’s will.” When humans claim the authority to define what others should think, feel, and be, they claim an authority that belongs only to the divine. Nor is it for any human to dictate to others what the divine is.

This power to name is, of course, what many religions appropriate, a tradition that Promise Keepers seeks to (gently) continue. It is a power that certain women have been able to maneuver within to their own ends. It is also a power that relies on some level of coercion – through the definition of God and sin, of healthy and sick, godly and ungodly, through the fear of economic devastation or sexual victimization. Likewise, the concept of the stable family is one that, to Judith Stacey, historically has “rested upon coercion, overt or veiled, and on inequality.”300 When religion defines an appropriate family order and authority structures, and when “the psychological” has such power to define the self, the two perpetuate and abet those systemic means of exerting power. In such a world, then, one must ask whether “submission” can ever be fully willing.

300 Stacey, In the Name of the Family, 68.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary texts.


Secondary texts.


----- *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.


Non-Promise Keepers Bibles


VITA

Erica Jane Smith

Born at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, July 1961. Graduated from Christian County High School, Hopkinsville, Kentucky, 1979; B.A. in journalism and government, Western Kentucky University, 1983; an editor for 17 years for The Virginian-Pilot newspaper, Norfolk, Virginia; now working independently in publishing. This thesis completes the requirements for M.A., American Studies, the College of William and Mary.