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## EVANGELICAL MEN'S MOVEMENTS

By Randall Reed

In 1991 the Berlin Wall fell, and the cold war was officially over. Many things changed with that event, but it is perhaps not just a coincidence that at the same moment the men's movement came into being. The election of Bill Clinton in 1992, a man who would make famous the phrase "I feel your pain" and whose approach commentators label as "feminized," added to the confusion rather than eliminated it. The strong silent John Wayne man that was the model of manhood throughout so much of the cold war evaporated, set upon by changing norms for women, sex, and economics. It is not surprising then, that in this time of uncertainty the question of what it meant to be a "man" became a hot topic. Robert Bly and the secular men's movement prodded men to dig deep, to understand the hurt their fathers had inflicted upon them, and to reconnect with their feelings emerging as new men (Bly 2004).

Evangelicals were not left behind in this movement, but the traditionalist foundations ran deep. The Promise Keepers emerged as the alternative to the men's movement, but it was plagued by conflict itself. It strained between the traditionalist model that had been the staple of evangelical/fundamentalist gender relations, and the call of new modes of gender relations from both the secular men's movement and the women's movements. The leaders and visionaries associated with the Promise Keepers actually had conflicting visions of manhood that participants sought to synthesize. In the end, the fall of the Promise Keepers in both attendance and finances may ultimately have been the result of these conflicting messages as the struggle to be a "Christian man" remains ongoing.

## MEN'S MOVEMENTS

For most of the New Testament it is the category of woman that is a problem. Paul in 1 Corinthians in particular seems to have an issue with women stepping outside of their cultural roles and taking on the positions of teacher and prophets. The author of Revelation, John of Patmos, rails against the "false teacher" Jezebel, and the pastoral epistles seem quick to want to put the genie back in the bottle, and women back in their subservient place. This continued in the early Christian period. Studies of the early church fathers have shown that women, particularly those outside the control of the traditional

patriarchal family structure—widows and virgins—took on roles that made those church fathers extremely uncomfortable. Gnostic literature seems to indicate in certain branches of Christianity, women (particularly Mary Magdalene) who were seen as leaders of the Christian movement. In the New Testament period, then, the problem of gender was continually a problem about womanhood—what they could and could not do and be. Being a man, on the other hand, was not nearly as problematic for the early church. Paul talks about men’s submission to God, their responsibilities to their wives, but even here the problem really seems to be the role of women, not the role of men.

In the late twentieth century, however, the category of man suddenly became problematized. In light of the feminist movement, women no longer were content to have as partners, men who assumed a dominant relational position. The psychological revolution beginning at the end of nineteenth century, and through the twentieth century, found that being a man was not as easy as was previously thought. Men’s needs and desires were examined and clinically categorized, and what had been seen as basic urges, suddenly was seen as the result of highly complicated processes that involved one’s mother and father, culture and social expectations. Even the category of sex was suddenly up in the air, as the Gay Liberation movement problematized the issue of men’s sexuality, and called into question the normativity of heterosexuality. By the later part of the twentieth century, being a man had become confusing; expectations were no longer clear. The “Father Knows Best” model of the 1950s had fallen by the wayside, but in its place no other model had been established. Rather than a new consensus emerging, the question of masculinity became the ancillary byproduct of other movements with other central concerns.

The problem of masculinity was particularly prevalent in the evangelical communities. While the conservative Christian communities held stubbornly to the more patriarchal models of Victorian times, moderate evangelical men were clearly unsatisfied by the dominant father/dictator model of the past, and the ambiguity of the present. Into the vacuum stepped the men’s movements. The first steps in the burgeoning American Men’s Movement came from outside the Christian church with the publication of Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (2004) and Sam Keen’s *Fire in the Belly* (1992). A series of “men’s books” followed, men’s studies programs were initiated, and the men’s movement found its niche.

## **IRON JOHN**

Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (2004) uses the Grimm’s fairytale, “Iron John.” The story of Iron John is one where a boy frees a wild-man and then goes off with him. He is eventually sent back to civilization where he rises from worker in the castle to a heroic knight who eventually marries the king’s daughter. Bly tries to explicate the crisis of the modern man through a reading of this story for modern life. Bly takes each element from the story and expands them with references to myths from other cultures, poetry, and the insights of psychology. The book is written as a meditation on manhood that sees the problem of today’s man as a loss of significant rites of passage that signal arrival as an adult male. Men no longer have a moment when they break from the mother and enter the world of men. Instead, the hard work of becoming a man is ignored, and the easier path is trod, which ultimately fails to clearly differentiate manhood from boyhood. The story of Iron John exemplifies the way men are hurt by the father through abuse or neglect. Bly advocates the route to becoming a man through spending a season with the inner wild man (Bly 2004).

Bly is careful to state repeatedly that he is not calling for a return of patriarchy. This is particularly true when he begins his discussion of the "Warrior," an area that seems rife with danger. A history of the rape and abuse of women that accompanied the act of war certainly cannot be far from the surface in any such discussion. But Bly tries to explain that his notion of the warrior is not to redeem some testosterone soaked pillager from the past, but rather to endorse a notion of men who are committed "to self-sacrifice and service to the king, to intellectual combat, to clean fighting in marriage" (Bly 2004, 169). Older men have failed younger men by not mentoring them into the ways of the warrior. Fathers have wounded their sons instead, and mothers cannot help them. The story of Iron John functions as an allegory for the process of becoming a man, of reclaiming the notion of being "a man" and breaking free from the wounds of the father and the world of the mother.

The movement that arose from Bly's book, and others like it, became a media phenomenon. Men's gatherings became quite popular. Men would gather on weekends in forested camps where they would engage in ancient male rituals like sweatlodges or drumming. They would dance and howl and grasp at the "wildman" within. But also they would talk about their feelings, their confusions about what it means to be a man, and most importantly they would talk about their fathers. Dealing with the complex of emotions surrounding the father seemed to be at the heart of the emotional payoff of these gatherings. Men shared stories of hurts, abuses, and various experiences of neglect suffered at the hands of their father. Bly's notion of the father creating the wound that the son must forever carry, was actualized and shared at these gatherings.

## **THE EVANGELICAL MEN'S MOVEMENT HISTORY**

For the evangelical movement, men have always been a scarce commodity. In the nineteenth century, religion was seen as part of the domestic world dominated by women. Men were outside the church, more invested in harvesting crops than souls. But clearly, even in the throes of the separate spheres, men experienced a certain isolation from each other. With the increasing industrialization and urbanization of the work force at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a new emphasis on gatherings of men emerged. It is in this period that we see the founding of the Boy Scouts of America, who conveyed manhood as a rugged self-reliance, wilderness savvy and patriotic obligation. At this same time, their fathers were founding new fraternal orders, lodges, men's clubs and young men's fraternities as well. It began a period of male association that coupled masculine privilege with business advancement.

On the religious front, in the beginning of the twentieth century, there arose a new vision of the evangelical man called Muscular Christianity. Popularized by traveling evangelist Billy Sunday, himself a former professional baseball player, this new vision of Christianity was directed at men. It was a form of evangelicalism that dispensed with a weak and feminized Jesus, and instead envisioned the savior as a man's man. Sunday proclaimed Jesus a scrapper and analogies with sports and body-building peppered the language of this movement.

## THE PROMISE KEEPERS

The Evangelical Men's Movement in many ways is the heir of this muscular Christianity. It has been dominated by the Promise Keepers organization. The Promise Keepers were founded by Bill McCartney, a football coach at the University of Colorado. On a drive to a Christian Athletes dinner with Dave Wardell, the two men envisioned a stadium full of men bonded together through revival and discipleship. Their goal was to fill the University of Colorado's Folsom Field with 50,000 men. Starting with a core group of 72 men, the Promise Keepers fasted and prayed for this new movement. Their first gathering was far short of their goal, yet still impressive, as 4000 men showed up. A scant two years later, McCartney actually accomplished his goal and filled the stadium with men dedicated to the cause of Christian manhood.

The Promise Keepers quickly grew as an organization. An examination of the Promise Keepers attendance statistics shows a steady increase from 1990. The Promise Keepers claim that their conferences had an attendance of over 4000 the first year, 22,000 the next year, 50,000 the year after that, and by 1994, Promise Keeper conferences claimed 278,000 attendees. Those numbers continued exponential increases until 1996, when the Promise Keepers calculated a combined conference attendance of 1.1 million men. In 1997, the Promise Keepers descended on Washington with their Stand in the Gap march; inspired by, if not in answer to Minister Farrakhan's Million Man March in 1995. The Promise Keepers claimed a million men in attendance, and spent the day with speakers leading them in prayer, song, and speeches extolling the virtues of, and exhorting the men to, Christian manhood.

The Stand in the Gap march, however, represented the zenith of the Promise Keeper movement. Their attendance numbers began a precipitous decline after that. 1996 had already presaged a decline in the movement. Attendance was down some 400,000+ from 1995. The Stand in the Gap March seemed to indicate renewed interest, but in 1998 attendance continued to decline, even though conferences were no longer charging admission. Attendance seemed to plateau between 100,000 and 120,000 in the early part of the twenty-first century, but by 2007, attendance had dropped to 50,000 according to the official Promise Keeper estimates.

The fall in attendance likewise had significant impact on the Promise Keepers' budget. The budget for the Promise Keeper organization had largely come from attendance fees at conferences. With the elimination of such fees in 1998 as part of the Break Down the Walls campaign, which sought to include men from less affluent socio-economic demographics, the organization entered a financial crisis. The organization laid off staff and threatened to become an all-volunteer effort. It was saved from this fate by an infusion of donations, but continues as a significantly downsized version of its former self.

The ideology of the Promise Keepers has generated a great deal of controversy as well. The main tenets of the Promise Keepers are represented in the Seven Promises that its membership commits to following. They are:

1. A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring 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 pursuing 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 practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
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 supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.
6. A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
7. A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see Mark 12:30–31) and the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19–20).

These seven promises highlight a few important issues that are hallmarks of the Promise Keepers. The groups' focus is on building relationships with other men, much like the more secular version of the men's movement. These promises also take an usual step of specifically committing to breaking down racial barriers. And, interestingly, these promises highlight a commitment to sexual purity, and building strong marriages and families, seeming to indicate the founders feel this is an area of weakness in the Christian Church. Moreover, Promise Keepers are required to commit to their local church in terms of both time and money.

The commitment to a local church ties in with a second aspect of the Promise Keeper approach, which was to sign on churches as well as individuals. The Promise Keepers' organization attended to the clergy early on, often providing scholarships so that pastors could attend conferences, and the Promise Keepers created several conferences specifically for the clergy. As a result, churches often became the avenue by which the Promise Keepers were able to reach their audience. The Promise Keepers developed a special category of member called Ambassadors, specifically to liaison between the Promise Keeper movement and churches in their area.

However, the Promise Keepers are not without their critics. It is the fourth promise to build "strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values," that suggests to some critics that the Promise Keepers seek to reaffirm traditional patriarchal values in the end. George Lundskow's study, "Are Promises Enough?" sought to explore this question. Without doubt, Lundskow concludes, the men in the Promise Keeper movement see the traditional nuclear family, with the mother at home, and the father at work, as the ideal (Lundskow 2000). On the other hand, economic necessity often requires the woman to work outside the home and many see this as a viable choice. In particular, Lundskow notes "I did not encounter the 'barefoot and pregnant' attitude that some writers seemingly imply" (Lundskow 2000, 62). Though Lundskow does note that men in the Promise Keeper movement tend to see women as more emotional and intuitive, while men are seen as more material and logical. Such a world view then, implicitly sanctifies a more patriarchal vision.

On the other hand, the patriarch is more sensitive because of the Promise Keeper message. Using the concept of "Servant-Leader," Lundskow notes that these men feel free to cry, to view their wives as friends and partners, and are willing to admit when they are wrong and acknowledge when their wives are right. The wives that Lundskow interviews seem genuinely pleased with the effect the Promise Keepers has had on their mates, and the level to which their relationship with their husbands has improved (Lundskow 2000). While the Promise Keeper vision does not abandon the more traditionalist

notions of gender roles popular in fundamentalist/evangelical circles, it seeks to emphasize more engagement and humility within the marriage relationship.

However, if we turn to political issues related to gender, the vision becomes much narrower. Lundskow notes that abortion is clearly understood as murder, and no discussion of choice is really engaged, though one individual in the study acknowledged that in the case of rape, the issue is perhaps less black and white. On the issue of homosexuality, on the other hand, little ambiguity is apparent. While Lundskow notes that none of the men he interviewed thought it was appropriate to persecute gays or discriminate in employment, the overall opinion was that homosexuality was considered clearly as sin, and should be condemned as such. Though certainly the men Lundskow interviewed were willing to admit that everyone sins, and that judging should be left to God (Lundskow 2000).

John Bartowski has done a more recent study of the literature of the Promise Keepers and the evangelical men's movement in general (Bartowski 2004). It should be noted, that while certainly the Promise Keepers are the most visible representatives of the evangelical men's movement, they do not speak with one voice. In reality, there has been an explosion of literature oriented towards being a godly man sold in Christian bookstores across the country. The majority of the authors have appeared at Promise Keeper conferences, and thus, while not officially promoting Promise Keeper doctrine, they bear the Promise Keeper imprimatur by being a part of these meetings. Bartowski's survey identified four different models of "manhood" propounded by this literature: The Rational Patriarch, The Expressive Egalitarian, The Tender Warrior, and The Multicultural Man (Bartowski 2004).

The Rational Patriarch is often the stereotype of the Promise Keepers that Lundskow is fighting against. This is a reaffirmation of traditional masculinity that focuses on a clear essentialist division between women and men, which, and in the end, validates the patriarchal social order. Here, as seen above, women are seen as intuitive but also as detail oriented. This makes them naturally more adept at caregiving for children. On the other hand, men are logical and aggressive, prone to taking initiative, and more focused on a long-range vision. This makes the man the natural leader of the household, and The Rational Patriarch model of masculinity is engaged in demanding that men not shrink from their responsibility as such. It may be lonely at the top, but men are clearly suited to be on top, and have a duty to take up their calling unflinchingly.

While certainly Lundskow's study showed hints of the Rational Patriarch, it is the Expressive Egalitarian that seems more prominent in his interviews (Lundskow 2000). Here, the emphasis is less on essentialized differences than human qualities that all people share, and particularly the emotional work of being a human being. For this model, the emphasis is on being in touch with one's feelings, and sharing those with both male friends and female partners. The result is a greater amount of relational egalitarianism, where husbands and wives are more partners than in the top down approach of the Rational Patriarch. The focus of decision-making among couples is mutually acceptable solutions and not the implementation of male prerogative. Though Bartowski notes that his Expressive Egalitarian author is often unable to completely escape the sexual essentialism that is found in the Rational Patriarch, and occasionally engages in contradiction as he attempts to employ both notions simultaneously (Bartowski 2004).

The Tender Warrior is a model that has a greater debt to the secular men's movement and Iron John than the others. Here we see what Bartowski calls the Poetics of Promise-Keeping. The hallmark of this model is less its rationalist discourse, and more its mythopoetic metaphors for what comprises

manhood. The Tender Warrior is armed with defensive battle attire and offensive weapons. Symbolic imagery permeates the discussion, often obscuring the finer points of how this move to manhood is practically to be accomplished. In marriage, the Tender Warrior carves out a middle ground between the Rational Patriarch and the Expressive Egalitarian, which employs the servant-leader notion Lundskow picked up on before. But nevertheless, it is the Warrior who goes out to battle and defends home and hearth, and thus maintains the status of headship in the family. But the very nature of the poetic language employed resists categorization as overtly patriarchal, for this model is characterized by “balancing reason with emotion and strength with tenderness, these tender tacking movements highlight the semi-porous boundary between ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’”(Bartowski 2004, 61). The Tender Warrior eschews neither in himself.

The Multicultural Man is perhaps the most unexpected turn that the evangelical men’s movement, and specifically the Promise Keepers, have taken. The focus of the seventh promise above is grounded in the racial division that underlies our society. The Promise Keepers are quite straightforward, name racism as a “sin,” and one that requires redemption beyond merely divine forgiveness but including “racial reconciliation.” To be sure, this is not a return to the social gospel of the 1960s, but maintains the characteristic evangelical emphasis on the individual. Thus, it is racial reconciliation that is accomplished “one relationship at a time” (Bartowski 2004, 63). The Promise Keepers themselves tried to mediate this with the removal of conference fees that would seek to allow others from different racial and social backgrounds to join the gatherings with their Breaking Down the Gates campaign. In the end, this move, while