

Promise Keepers

In 1990 a former football coach, Bill McCartney, founded a men's group in Denver, Colorado, that consisted of 72 men. Today, the organization called Promise Keepers holds rallies in many major North American cities drawing tens of thousands. Among the large crowds of men that gather to make a drastic shift in their lives are Reformed Christians, members of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Earlier this year (Vol.2, No.20) we published an article by Rev. G. I. Williamson of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in which he describes and evaluates this movement. His article first appeared in *New Horizons*, the official OPC magazine, and was also placed in *Reformed Perspective* of February 1996. And surely Rev. Williamson's article was on the mark. Yet, it is disturbing that via the Refnet (a Reformed discussion group on the Internet) and personal conversations we notice that members of the Canadian Reformed Churches feel the need to attend such conferences.

We wonder what causes such a movement to take root and if these causes are also the reasons why church members are drawn to them. At the same time we will look at how we ought to react to such a phenomenon and why we ought not to be there.

The Reasons For

British Columbia Report (BCR), a weekly news magazine with a conservative focus, periodically reports about Promise Keepers and their rallies. One of their earlier articles begins with: 'Sensitive New Age Guys may be all the rage with feminists and the mainstream media but a recent rally ... indicates traditional views of manhood still have appeal and relevance.' (BCR, Aug 7, 1995) Later, in the same article, they note that a certain Mr. Carl Griffiths interviewed many of the men who attended one of the rallies in Seattle. He concluded that most of them were 'looking for ways to enhance their lives ... A lot of them were sick and tired of seeing men being kicked around by the feminist movement, tired of seeing the idea of family values run into the ground. They wanted to stand up for society and become better husbands and better fathers.'

So it appears that this movement is a reaction. After many years of feminist activity in society some men have come to the realization that things have changed, and they don't like it. Now it is sure that many of the men involved in Promise Keepers think deeper than an angry reaction to the changes in their lives due to feminist influences. Many may realize that the family as it was defined thirty to forty years ago was more in line with Biblical teaching, or, as is so often noted, the Judeo-Christian ethic. Many may realize that society has digressed dramatically from the teachings of their parents and grand parents. These men have realized that their leadership of family and society has eroded ... and they want to reverse the situation. One of the attendees of a PK conference was quoted as saying, "In too many cases, in our families and churches, we've abdicated our God-given leadership role to women. If we're going to be the people the Lord wants us to be, we have to recover that leadership, leadership for love, protection and service." (BCR, Sept 30, 1996)

Likely Canadian Reformed Christians would not put their reasons for attending Promise Keepers' conferences in the way most describe it. Some say they have gone because they 'want to

see what it is like' - out of curiosity. Others appear to be lacking something and are seeking spiritual growth. At bottom they are not completely satisfied with the 'status quo'.

But all will agree that we are 'standing in the rubble of a destroyed literate society, looking at the ruins of education, family and child protection', as Robert Bly says in his book, *The Sibling Society*. This same author summarizes the present state of affairs by saying, 'No one at the time of the early feminist progress could possibly have known how fast the old or nuclear family system would collapse with nothing much to replace it; how complete the abandonment of children would become. What seemed eternal - the father and mother house - was only a house of cards.'

The Reasons Against

As with so many aspects of western society, so also the family and the role of man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother, have their origins in Christian doctrine. Therefore it should not surprise us that when a longing for the past presents itself that a glance is made at Christianity. Unfortunately the desire to seek Christianity stems from the urge to return things to the way they were, rather than a repentant admission of guilt and inability to correct, leading to a dependence on the only solution, Jesus Christ.

Promise Keepers want to address the wrongs they see in society, as well as their personal situations, by 'espousing a high powered combination of Christianity, commitment to - and leadership of - wife and children, sexual purity, and fellowship with other men.' (BCR Dec.2, 1996) In doing so they turn to a human solution sprinkled with religious flavours, but they do not submit the complete Word of God. There we read: "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. ... Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God." (Psalm 146:2,5)

But that is not the where the Promise Keepers go. They do not want to turn in obedience to God's Word for direction and correction, but they turn to the wisdom of man and his inventions about God and His Word.

Promise Keepers want to use the format of some Biblical teaching. They are impressed by some of the methodology of Scripture, but they do not want to submit fully to God's Word. As has been man's constant tendency, they want to solve their problems in their own strength.

The Bible teaches ten commandments. Promise Keepers need make only seven promises. The Bible teaches about belonging to God through Jesus Christ. Promise Keepers speak about belonging to one another through their own commitments. The Bible teaches us to live according to all the Words that Christ has taught us. Promise Keepers from all man of church groups join together as one in promising to 'honour Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to his word through the power of the Holy Spirit.'

In addition to, and possibly as a result of these principle concerns, there is the danger of fringe influences. "...Several of the group's leaders, including (founder Bill) McCartney himself, claim to have received direct revelations from Jesus Christ. (BCR, Oct.21, 1996, pg.22)

Although the Promise Keeper movement recognizes the depravation of society and wants to reverse it, we cannot understand that church members would find solace there. Within the Church of Jesus Christ is the comfort and protection against the evils of the world. In the Church we are given the full Word of God - the complete blueprint to a life of holiness, joy, and communion. It is in the Church that we may make promises that lead to a proper working out of family life,

protection and instruction of children, effective roles of men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. It is in the Church that we may experience the communion of saints that allows us to help one another to serve our Father. It is in the Church that we may promise to '...wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in the Christian Church ... rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word', etc. It is at the beginning of our marriages, before God and many of our brothers and sisters, that we promise (and once is enough) 'never to forsake him/her, ... It is in Church that we promise '...as father and mother to instruct...' our children and to cause them to be instructed in the complete doctrine of salvation.

At the Red Deer, Alberta conference, Promise Keeper's education director, Rod Cooper, spoke on "The Four Marks of a Man of Hope": stability amidst problems; love forgiving past wrongs; hospitality offering safety; and the eager service of others. (BCR, Sept.30, 1996) The Belgic Confession speaks about the marks of Christians: 'They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, fell from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works.' (Belgic Conf., Art 29)

The thing that Promise Keepers makes a feeble attempt at accomplishing because of what some men have finally realized about society, the Church has had in a much fuller way for a very long time. May the Spirit direct us to recognize the riches we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. May we rejoice in belonging to Him and His body, the Church. PdB

OUR CHRISTIAN 'COSTUME'

Many cultures in the world have a traditional costume that dates back to a century or three ago. These costumes were worn for practical reasons, but eventually they came to represent the culture of the particular people by which they were worn. The Russians, for example, could be identified by big bearskin hats. The Mexicans wore their ponchos and sombreros. You could point out a Dutchman because he wore wooden shoes and baggy pants.

Wearing these costumes did not make you a Russian, a Mexican, or a Dutchman. Still, if you belonged to one of these cultures you would quite naturally put on the appropriate costume. The costume that you wore would identify you to the people around you. People would be mildly surprised to meet a young fellow dressed in wooden shoes and baggy pants, hanging around a windmill who said he was Polish. Why? Because they would expect him to be Dutch, of course.

Nowadays, except for at certain festivals and expositions, cultures are not identified, for the most part, by their attire. It is usually not possible to tell a German Canadian from an English Canadian or a French or Dutch or Italian Canadian. More unfortunately, it is often not possible to distinguish a *Christian* Canadian from an unbelieving Canadian, especially in the case of the youth.

Actually it is not fair, perhaps, to say that there are no identifiable differences between Canadian and Christian Canadian culture. After all, there are church services and Bible Studies; we pray and read the Bible before our meals. Those things *are* the Christian 'costumes' which identify us in the same way that a sombrero would indicate the presence of a Mexican. But for a costume to be effective, it must be complete.

Imagine if you saw a man wearing wooden shoes and baggy pants, but also a poncho and sombrero. Is he a Dutchman or a Mexican? Neither costume is sufficient to identify the nationality of the man. The two costumes conflict and don't tell you anything. It is the same with your

Christian 'costume'. To properly identify you, your costume has to be completely Christian from head to toe. No other garments can be allowed, or they will confuse the observer.

This is especially relevant for the young people. How is it possible to identify the young guy who wears grungy clothes, drives like a madman in a car that is essentially a speaker on wheels blasting rock music, swears, goes to bars and theatres, and maybe has an earring or two - how is it possible to identify that guy with the same person who goes to church and Bible Study on Sunday? Put aside, for the moment, all arguments about whether some of these activities (i.e. grungy clothes, rock music, bar hopping, earrings) are right or wrong, because there are often no clear cut right and wrong answers. Consider, instead, the *impressions* these things make. What effect do these activities have on the presentation of your Christian costume? What identity does the person described above have?

Do you think it is unfair to be judged by what music you listen to or what you do for fun on a Friday night? Well, think on this scenario. Imagine that you are loitering outside while waiting for a Bible Study meeting to start and it happens that two new guys, whom you've never met, drive into the parking lot at the same time. One new guy has his base pumping loud enough to wilt the parsonage garden. He's wearing jeans (on Sunday), has an earring, and you hear him mutter a curse when he bangs his head while getting out of the car. The other new guy's car is not vibrating to the thump of a rock beat. He drives into the parking lot without spraying gravel all over the place and he's dressed nicely in a suit. When you are introduced to these two fellows later, who will you feel most at ease with? If you are a person who likes to party, play his music loud, and squeal his tires, chances are pretty good that you'll be more interested to meet the first guy. You can tell by his music, his attitude, and his clothes, his costume, that this guy thinks like you do! You *judge* by his actions that he is your type of person. It is almost irrelevant whether or not it is *fair* to judge a person by his clothes or the earring he wears. Actions have consequences, and one of the consequences is that they shape your identity in the eyes of others. Sure, a person might be wrong to make assumptions about you based on what music you listen to and the clothes you wear. But there are two reasons why that person's mistake is quite reasonable. Ninety-nine percent of the time your actions reflect your attitude, so you can hardly blame the person who lumps the remaining one percent with the other ninety-nine. Plus there is the fact that you would naturally make the same judgment (for different reasons maybe) yourself.

Bars are places where people get drunk, pick up a date, listen to secular music, and party for the sake of partying. Christians aren't interested in getting drunk, picking up unbelieving dates, listening to secular music, or partying for the sake of partying. Rock music is the medium of a society that hates God and blatantly promotes the breaking of His commands. Christians aren't interested in hating God or breaking His commands. The values and priorities of people who visit bars, listen to rock music, drive recklessly, swear, dress sloppily on Sundays, etc ... are different from the values and priorities of Christians. So it is not terribly surprising that people are confused when they see 'Christians' practicing these worldly pursuits. It is a case of mixing two costumes. When you do that, you lose your identity.

That does not mean that putting aside these sorts of clothes, music, and activities makes you a Christian. Of course not! There are many people who avoid bars, theatres, rock, and swearing and who dress neatly and drive soberly, but are not Christians. Living a godly life does not make you a Christian or even identify you as one. Living a godly life, however, shows that your faith has

an effect in your life. It is the costume that you willingly put on when you transfer your citizenship to the Kingdom of Heaven. So if you wear a different costume, or if you try to mix two costumes together, you are denying your true citizenship.

This article has specifically mentioned the youth, but the problem of mistaken identity is not limited to them. Everyone is responsible for living a life that is not in conflict with their faith. Everyone must wear the Christian costume. Why does a Dutchman wear his wooden shoes and his baggy pants? Well, because he's a Dutchman and not an Arab. How do you know he's a Dutchman? Because he wears wooden shoes and baggy pants, of course. Why does a Christian 'wear' a godly life? Well, because he's a Christian and not a person of the world. How can you see that his faith is really working in him? By his godly walk of life, of course.

"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do," wrote James (2:16). We cannot see each other's hearts. We do not know whether there is true faith or not. We can only go by what we see; we can only tell if a person's citizenship is in heaven or on earth by the person's costume. If you have faith, it is important to put on the right costume; it is important to clothe yourself in a godly life. The things that you do reflect who you are, not just to others around you, but also to yourself if you care to look. Take a look! Is your costume, your life, a Christian one?

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A Letter to the Editors

Brothers:

Thank you for your copies of "Reformed Polemics". It is reassuring to see and read stances taken against certain issues taking place within our federation of churches. If only, we as Canadian Reformed Churches as a whole, could see the direction we are going by compromising God's Word and accepting so many issues without Scriptural consultation. We are scattering ourselves all over the place.

May God continue to give us all the wisdom to discern whatever conflicts with His Word and declare openly to all our brothers and sisters any errors against it.

I would also like to express some thoughts about an ongoing trend within our churches. Attached is a "book review" on Dr. Van Dam's latest release. I hope that it, too, will 'convince some who doubt'.

There is a new book in our 'Reformed' literature written by Dr. C. Van Dam entitled "Divorce & Remarriage".

The topic of this book has been under discussion for centuries in the church. A sound stance has never been made. Although one could argue that by condoning it a stance of sorts has been made. Yet, the opposition remains. And rightly so.

This issue has been the topic of several books and has also been discussed in books dealing with various ethical issues. Yet very few books come with proper Scriptural references to warn against remarriage after a divorce, regardless of the reasons for the divorce.

To use major assembly decisions made over the centuries is a poor ground to stand on when God's Word shows otherwise. Although major assemblies make many good decisions, they have made mistakes. With this issue mistakes have been made, and upheld, for far too long.

In his book, Dr. Van Dam points out how God forbids such a horrible sin against the seventh commandment. And yet he writes that remarriage after a divorce is allowed for various reasons, even though this contradicts what God says in His Word.

One serious example which I would like to give is:

"The flesh bond of a marriage as created by God in Gen.2, where God created woman from the flesh (rib) of Adam (...and the two became one flesh), cannot be compared to the bond between Christ and His Church (Bridegroom and Bride), as referred to in Eph.5:31. This union is a spiritual one and does not speak of a physical blood-bond or kinship."

If this is not a physical blood bond, then Christ's coming into the flesh is meaningless. Eph.5:25 tells us: 'Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.' He 'gave Himself up for her' physically, not only spiritually. By His blood He has joined the 'physical' church to Himself. It was the sins of our flesh for which He bore upon Himself God's wrath. How much more physical can you get?

This physical blood bond can only mean also a physical kinship. How often are we Christians referred to as brethren, with the same Father as He has?

There are many other things in this book which show a lack of insight. Whatever validity does exist only shows much more clearly how wrong it is to remarry following a divorce. In God's Word there are no exceptions!

If marriage and divorce are to be seen in this light it shows an extremely weak marital bond that God created before the fall of mankind. "But from the beginning it was not so." (Matth.19:8)

Is this book to be recommended? Yes! But read it with a proper insight. I have learned a great deal more about the issue from this book, but am only more convinced that remarriage after a divorce is a sin against God.

"You shall not commit adultery"

Bill Doekes

NEWS

Separation without Secession: Inter-classical Conference Urges Christian Reformed Synod to Create New Conservative Classes

Meeting at First Christian Reformed Church in the Chicago suburb of South Holland, 219 conservative ministers, elders, and deacons opposed to the ordination of women convened to consider a proposal made last November to consider seceding from the denomination if Synod 1996 did not overturn the decision by Synod 1995 to allow the ordination of women. Since Synod 1996 not only did not overturn its decision but declared three women eligible for call as ordained ministers, the Inter-classical Conference considered the option of secession but voted instead by a 75 to 68 margin to create theologically defined classes composed of conservative churches opposed to the ordination of women.

PITTSBURGH (November 20, 1996) URNS - By this time next year, the Christian Reformed denomination may be faced with suspension or expulsion from the major fellowship of conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in the US and Canada, an organization the CRC helped to begin 21 years ago. Meeting in Pittsburgh on November 19 and 20, the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) voted to study suspending the Christian Reformed Church from membership because of the CRC's decision to ordain women ministers, elders, and evangelists. At 292,000 members, the CRC is the organization's largest member denomination.

Similar to but much smaller than the National Council of Churches, NAPARC counts seven conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations as full members. Any move to suspend or terminate CRC membership will require a two-thirds vote and approval within three years by two-thirds of the national synods or general assemblies of the member denominations.