

Gender politics in conservative men's movements: beyond complexity, ambiguity and pragmatism

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ABSTRACT. The article examines different attempts to analyse the Christian men's movement, Promise Keepers, and the fatherhood responsibility movement. Complexity used as an argument to abandon the search for a gender ideology in the movements is criticized. Despite the presence of complex features, for example, regarding Promise Keepers' view on gender roles in the family, there are common assumptions of gender. These assumptions are found in the very conception of the movements: in the "society-in-a-moral-crisis" argument. Here, men are actors and women are passively dependent on men. Promise Keepers' "soft" pragmatism and use of feminist rhetoric disguise this gender politics within the movement.

How should we understand movements such as Promise Keepers and other conservative men's movements that have emerged in the Western world in recent decades? Academics and others have given diverse answers to this question. Some argue that these movements are hopelessly reactionary – a backlash to the women's movement and feminism – while others suggest that they are a positive chance for men to reflect on their masculinity and their male role, similar to women's engagement in the women's movement (see e.g. Novosad 1996; Lippy 1997; Messner 1997; McDonald 1997). Some place themselves in a more restrained position, and express a – at least at first appearance – less normative standpoint. The sociologist Rhys H. Williams, for example, argues that Promise Keepers cannot be reduced to either one of these positions. "Promise Keepers are all the things assigned to it and more – simultaneously" – Williams argues (2001, 1). Williams represents an interesting trend in the debate; namely to see Promise Keepers – as well as other conservative men's movements – as *complex* and *contradictory* when it comes to gender issues. But the questions that can be asked are: should one really stop there? Is it enough to draw the conclusion that a movement such as Promise Keepers is complex and contradictory?

This article examines consequences of emphasizing *complexity*. To see the complexity of a movement is, I argue, absolutely necessary. But to acknowledge the presence of contradictory or ambiguous elements is not

enough; the complexity *itself* must be analyzed and deconstructed. My purpose is, thus, to point towards the problems of a too “accepting” view of particular discourses; for example, in the acceptance of Promise Keepers’ claims to being pragmatic, and thus, “non-political”, and to highlight the consequences of this view for feminist theory and politics.

The US Christian men’s movement, Promise Keepers, will be at the center of my analysis, although I sometimes also make reference to the broader conservative men’s movement in the US, the fatherhood responsibility movement (to which Promise Keepers is said to belong). Promise Keepers was founded at the beginning of the 1990s and is a movement “dedicated to uniting men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world”, as it is expressed in the Mission Statement (“Seven Promises” 1999, 235). The main argumentation in the movement is that there is a moral crisis in society, and that men play a decisive role in this crisis as being both its cause and solution. Men therefore need to come together and end their sinful lives, and take back their god-given responsibility – in the family, in the church and in society. The movement has attracted considerable media attention because of its rapid growth and because of its spectacular forms of meetings in sports arenas; from a handful of participants 1990, to stadium conferences with over 50,000 men participating three years later.

The first part of the article deals with ways of talking about Promise Keepers and the fatherhood responsibility movement. In the second part, I offer my analysis of the discourse of Promise Keepers, where assumptions of gender within the movement appear, beyond complexities and ambiguities. Here, the empirical material consists primarily of texts from the website of Promise Keepers, as well as *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* – the book in which the fundamental ideology of the movement is presented and explained. This material can, I argue, be seen as the “most official” material of the movement. For many years the website has been an important forum for the movement’s contact with the media and

other interested parties, not least visible in the fact that many writers on the movements – journalists and academics – refer to the website. Through analyzing the website and *Seven Promises* I intend to show that one does not have to go to the more extreme writings connected to the movement to find assumptions of gender worth highlighting.¹

My theoretical and methodological point of departure is in discourse theory (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). According to this theory, social phenomena are never fixed or complete in some final way since processes of significations can never be definite. As a result, there is a constant struggle between different discourses over society and identity, and the purpose of discourse analysis is thus to identify the processes whereby struggles over signification of different signs take place. The term *discourse* refers to fixations of signification within a certain field, and all signs within a discourse are called *moments*. The signification of the moments is fixed through the differences between the moments; one moment thereby derives its meaning from chains of equivalence with other moments. A discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity; to fix, though never completely successfully, the meaning of elements, the ambiguous signs, and make them unambiguous, make them into moments. Discourses are articulated around *nodal points*; that is, privileged discursive points around which the other moments are arranged. Since a discourse is always constituted in relation to something outside itself, it can also always be undermined by this “outside”, which means that its unambiguity always runs the risk of being disrupted by other discourses’ definitions of signs.

Using a discourse analytic approach, it is possible to look for fundamental assumptions – for nodal points and important moments – in different discourses, while at the same time arguing that these fixations can *change*. This approach also stresses the relational character of discursive formations and the struggle for

signifying elements between different discourses.

Promise Keepers, and the fatherhood responsibility movements as a whole, can be seen as an attempt to fix the signification of different signs. The most important sign – the nodal point of the discourse – is, I will argue, “man”. The attempts to give fixity to this sign take place in a discursive field where the feminist discourse constitutes an important counter-discourse. The struggle over “man”, as well as other signs related to “man”, takes place in a, for the conservative and fundamentalist discourses, quite untraditional manner. This, in turn, has consequences for the way the movement is perceived, by academics and others.

“Men of Integrity”

Bill McCartney, head football coach at the University of Colorado, started Promise Keepers in 1990. Sport metaphors and symbolism are frequent within the movement, and were also part of the original idea; Bill – or “Coach McCartney” as he is usually referred to – and his friend Dave Wardell came up with the idea of filling a stadium with Christian men. McCartney and Wardell’s motivation came out of what they considered to be an enormous problem in US society: the moral crisis. “They had come to recognize a weakening of America’s moral structure and a breakdown in the roles men were playing in their households”, it is stated on the Promise Keepers’ website (www.promisekeepers.org).

Since the start, more than 3.5 million men have participated in arena and stadium conferences in the US, according to Promise Keepers’ own figures.² In the Autumn of 1997, approximately one million men gathered at the National Mall in Washington DC for “Stand in the Gap”, an assembly aimed at addressing the moral crises of our times. Though stadium and arena conferences certainly seem to be the most important fora for the movement, Promise Keepers also has radio shows, an extensive website, print and media resources, and “outreaches” to local churches. Furthermore,

Promise Keepers encourages men to form “accountability groups”; small groups of men coming together to support each other in “keeping their promises” (Faludi 1999).

What promises, then, should a Promise Keeper keep? To help men in becoming “men of integrity” – as it says in the movement’s logo – Promise Keepers has put together seven promises for its followers to keep. These promises are presented and explained in short essays by different authors in the book *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (1999).

1. A Man and His God. 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 Man and His Friends. 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 Man and His Integrity. A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
4. A Man and His Family. A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.
5. A Man and His Church. 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 Man and His Brothers. A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
7. A Man and His World. 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).

Promise Keepers is one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in the US since World War II (Dahlman 1998). However, the

movement is not a unique or isolated phenomenon; similar movements exist, in both religious and secular contexts. A well-known religious counterpart is Luis Farrakhan's revival of the Nation of Islam, and the Million Man March he arranged two years before Promise Keepers' Stand in the Gap (Messner 1997). The most obvious resemblance between the two movements is, of course, that they are strictly for "men only" (though in Promise Keepers, women are welcomed to participate as volunteers).

On the secular side, we find groups such as the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI). As Promise Keepers, the NFI was started in the beginning of the 1990s, and its agenda has similarities with Promise Keepers': the US society is in a crisis because men (fathers) do not accept their responsibilities in the family, so the argument goes. Changes in family forms, divorces, and teenage-pregnancies are seen as both cause and effect of the crisis, and in the long run, the absence of the fathers is believed to cause anything, from suicide and violent crime, to increased national debt (Gavanoas 2001b). NFI's goal – to stimulate a broadly based social movement with the purpose of restoring responsible fatherhood as a national priority – becomes visible in movements such as Promise Keepers, it is argued.

There is substantial evidence that our efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Whether reflected in stadiums filled with Promise Keepers, the streets of our nation's capital inundated with Million Man Marchers, or news stories highlighting the connection between absent fathers and such diverse social ills as crime, educational failure and welfare dependency, fatherhood is in the air. (www.fatherhood.org/accomplish.html)

Promise Keepers can, on the one hand, be seen as a part of the Religious Right. Most of the leaders within the movement have a background in conservative and fundamentalist Christian contexts; for example, Coach McCartney in the notorious anti-abortion movement Operation Rescue (Stodgehill 1997; Dahlman 1998). However, the leadership within the movement continuously declares that Promise Keepers is a non-political organization, and they have long

tried to avoid commenting on sensitive matters, such as abortion, homosexuality, and even women. On the other hand, Promise Keepers has been influencing sectors of US society other than just the traditional fundamentalist camps. The movement is well known in the population, and many Americans, even non-Christians, express their sympathies with the movement's ideals (Johnson 2000). The methods used by the movement to reach out – where secular symbols are mixed with, or given, religious content – seem to make it a popular object of study. Other features of the movement attract considerable media attention as well, for example, the emphasis on the importance of men building relationships with other men, and that men also have – and should, to a larger extent, show – feelings. Taken together, this certainly makes the image of the movement somewhat complex.

Understanding the men's movements: complexity and pragmatism

The unconventional methods of Promise Keepers, and related movements, as well as some vagueness in the ideology, have resulted in an interesting trend in the way of understanding the movement. As indicated above, reactions within the academic context are very mixed indeed. Hardly surprising, the discussion has often focused on gender issues and on whether one should understand Promise Keepers and related movements as anti- or pro-feminist. In an increasing number of analyses of the movements, centrality is given to notions of *complexity* and *ambiguity*.

Multiple gender ideologies

In a special issue of the journal *Sociology of Religion* on the Promise Keepers, the sociologist of religion, William H. Lockhart (2000) searches for the "gender ideology" of Promise Keepers. His conclusion is the declaration that there is not one, but four different gender ideologies or approaches represented in the movement.

According to the first approach, *the Traditionalist*, gender differences were designed by God in the Garden of Eden. God desired a

hierarchical order in society, and if hierarchy was disturbed, the societal order was disturbed as well, resulting in chaos. In this approach, God is the ultimate authority – mediated through the Scriptures – and husbands, parents and pastors are representatives of God's authority in society. An example of this perspective within the ideology of Promise Keepers is the – famous and often quoted – passage by Tony Evans in *Seven Promises*, where he describes how a man should become “spiritually pure”:

The first thing you should do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: “Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.” Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back ... Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently but lovingly. But lead! (Quoted in Spalding 1996, 262.)³

The traditionalist gender ideology in Promise Keepers is the most commonly acknowledged approach by outsiders, for example by women's organizations such as NOW (National Organization for Women), Lockhart argues (see also <http://www.now.org/issues/right/pk.html>).

In the second approach, the *Psychological Archetypes Orientation*, Robert Bly and other mythopoetic and Jungian writers are huge influences, even though the Bible is still considered the most important source for the understanding of masculinity. This approach offers four different archetypal male roles – king, warrior, mentor, and friend. Thus, gender identity is more flexible in this approach compared with the traditionalist one since all men do not have to fit into one single model of masculinity, Lockhart argues.

The third approach, the *Biblical Feminist*, seeks to transcend the division between feminine and masculine, and argues that men can be both tough and tender. Here, the focus is on unity of humanity; God created both men and women. The different gender roles originate from the Fall of Man, but thanks to Jesus, there is a possibility for men and women to “go beyond the curse”, through empowerment;

“God empowering the man to change his life, the husband empowering the wife as a co-leader, the father empowering his children to become equals” (p. 80). However, Lockhart admits, the biblical feminist approach is very rare within Promise Keepers.

The fourth approach, the *Pragmatic Counseling*, “*Why Can't We All Get Along*”, is the dominant approach in the official discourse of Promise Keepers according to Lockhart. Instead of political arguments and solutions, this approach concentrates on healing hurts and finding practical solutions. The focus is on how to, in practice, fix one's marriage and family so that it works. That the man should be the head of the household is sometimes mentioned, but above all, the importance of building meaningful relationships and strengthening one's family – “whatever it takes” – is emphasized. The pragmatic counseling approach is less interested in what gender roles are supposed to be, than in concern for what can be done to help people get along in concrete situations. However, Lockhart reminds us that this way of arguing can indeed result in an unconscious acceptance and reproducing of cultural assumptions of gender roles.

Even though the fourth approach according to Lockhart is dominant in the ideology of Promise Keepers, the existence of other views on gender makes him refrain from saying that there is a gender ideology in the movement. It is in this light we should understand the often vague pronouncements on gender roles by the leaders of the movement: an ambiguous official stance will allow men with different views on gender roles within the same organization. The leaders of Promise Keepers are well aware of this, Lockhart argues: “... if they make a declaration one way or another on male headship they will split their support. In addition, the pragmatic approach they generally endorse does not promote ‘unnecessary’ arguments” (p. 85).

But what is it, then, that unites the movement? According to Lockhart it is Promise Keepers' skillful utilization of cultural and organizational resources – events, music, images, and so on –

that have been used to unify the men, despite their different backgrounds and despite their different views on gender roles in the family.

Though one might agree with Lockhart that there are some different views on gender roles in the family within the movement, one should ask whether these four “gender ideologies” – with which, notably, Lockhart means “gender roles in the family” – really differ from each other in any fundamental way? The basic assumptions of the traditionalist and the psychological archetypal approaches hardly do. The latter approach offers a few more possible roles for men to choose from, but masculinity and femininity are in both seen as something given and unchangeable. And even the biblical feminist approach, despite its less rigid definition of both masculinity and femininity, is still dichotomous and hierarchal in its view of gender, visible in the “solution” offered: the possibility of “empowering” emanates from God and is given to the husband, and through him to the wife and children. Thus, the man is, as in the other two, still the primary actor. He is still on a mission from God, given the power to make a change (or to refrain from doing so).

Neither is the pragmatic counseling approach in a contradictory relation to the others. On the contrary, as Lockhart notes (but never further develops), the pragmatic approach can indeed reproduce different normative assumptions of gender and gender roles. One could ask whether Promise Keepers’ emphasis on pragmatism really is a gender ideology similar to the other three, since no position on gender is taken, but rather avoided. Lockhart is, as we shall see, not alone in identifying this approach within Promise Keepers, nor is he the only one refraining from delving deeper into its consequences for the gender ideology of the movements.

Thus, although the different gender ideologies identified by Lockhart do have important similarities, these are not acknowledged in his analysis. A probable reason for this is to be found in his very narrow definition of what a “gender ideology” is. For Lockhart, “gender ideology” seems to be

equivalent to “gender roles in the family”. The discussion is almost exclusively centered on the question of whether the movement argues for the husband’s headship in the family or not. This dimension is indeed important – not the least Lockhart’s identification of the unwillingness to talk about this in Promise Keepers – but it is not the *only* ideological assumption within the movement based on gender.

Ambiguity and non-political pragmatism

Looking at the US fatherhood responsibility movement as a whole, anthropologist Anna Gavanas (2001a, 2001b) too has difficulty finding a general approach to gender in the movement, especially because of the unclear pronouncements of what she calls the “fragile families wing” – consisting primarily of black working-class men – and also because of the leader’s argumentation that they are working for feminist issues (such as making men take on more responsibility within the family). Feminist critique of the movement has often failed to see this ambiguity concerning gender politics, Gavanas argues. The underlying assumptions within the movement are not to be found in gender politics, but rather in the heterosexist politics of the movement, a politics that excludes all other marriage and family constellations than the heterosexual one, she argues (Gavanas 2001a). Where Lockhart turns to cultural resources in looking for a unifying element, Gavanas turns to heteronormativity, and both see the movements’ inherent ambiguity, or lack of uniform ideology – as well as their self-definition as pro-feminist – as a reason for abandoning the project of looking for fundamental assumptions of gender.

Furthermore, other scholars stress the complexity of movements such as Promise Keepers. According to Martin Marty (1997) and David G. Hackett (1998), Promise Keepers should not merely be seen as a Trojan horse for the Religious Right. Leaders of the movement do gravitate to biblical texts that portray “the man of the house” as a necessary upholder of

God's authority, Marty admits. But the movement is more complex than that, and is rather to be understood as an evangelical crusade to provide forgiveness and repentance for men who have hurt their families as a result of their sinful behavior. Promise Keepers is a movement "devoted to personal, spiritual transformation rather than political change", Hackett declares (1998, 5). Like Lockhart, Marty and Hackett identify the pragmatic imperative in the complex messages of Promise Keepers, but avoid asking what this pragmatism means, and choose to take the leaders of the movement at their word when stating that Promise Keepers is about changing individual men, not doing politics. Thus, Marty and Hackett choose a very narrow definition of politics in general, and of gender politics in particular (see also McDonald 1997; Lippy 1997).

Complex talks (and silences) on gender

Is it meaningful to look for assumptions of gender, for a gender politics, within movements such as Promise Keepers? After the negative answers given above, I still want to argue that such a search is meaningful. Unlike Marty and Hackett, I do not separate politics from the personal, and though I agree with Gavanas that the movements are heteronormative, I still argue that there is a gender politics worth highlighting. And contrary to Lockhart, I do not reduce "gender ideology" to merely "gender roles in the family": there are assumptions of gender in Promise Keepers beyond the explicit talk about gender roles. In the very conception of the movement – in "the crisis argument" – there are important assumptions of gender.

A society in a state of crisis

Promise Keepers and the fatherhood responsibility movement as a whole see themselves as reactions to the "crisis" of the US society, a moral and spiritual crisis and a crisis in the institution of fatherhood. In talking about "the crisis", men are in focus. To quote Bill McCartney:

We started Promise Keepers because it was becoming evident that our culture had arrived at a moral crossroads. It was time for many men, including myself, honestly to assess what kind of influence we were having on the world.
(www.promisekeepers.org)

In *Seven Promises*, it is argued that the crisis is caused by *men's failure to take on their responsibilities* in the family, in the church, and in society as a whole. The man is pictured as a betrayer, a missing father and husband, an "abdicated leader", a careerist and a macho, morally decayed through pornography and infidelity, and a person who does not take his role as a leader seriously. There has been an effeminizing of the American man, writes Tony Evans, a development evolving from "a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of 'sissified' men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum" (quoted in Abrahams 1997, 107; see also Woodward and Keene-Osborn 1994; McDonald 1997). Through Promise Keepers, men are given a chance to put an end to these failures; a Promise Keeper takes his responsibility in the family (as a spiritual leader), supports his pastor, bridges racial boundaries, and evangelizes the world. "[N]ow is the time to re-evangelize America", writes one author, the solution of the moral crisis in society is to be found in men: "men should lead the way – in our families, our churches, and our communities" (Palau 1999, 217).

Active man, for better and for worse

What is the center of this argumentation? What is the nodal point of the discursive formation of Promise Keepers? Hardly surprisingly, I argue that the privileged sign in the Promise Keepers' discourse is *the man*. To this sign, other signs are tied, above all, the status as actor of the man; the man is the actor in the family, in church, and in the world. The future well-being of all these institutions rests on his shoulders. The moral and spiritual crisis in society is an effect of men's active renegeing of their responsibilities, and it is only if men – with the help of other men, and from God – learn to take on

responsibility and keep their promises that this negative trend can be broken.

Where, then, are the women? Gavanoas makes an interesting discovery when comparing the family value debate in the US today with that of the 1980s. While in the 1980s, single mothers were blamed for the “disruption of the family”, today, she suggests, men are being blamed (Gavanoas 2001a; see also Faludi 1991). This too rarely acknowledged change in focus is very important. It is no longer the single mother who is to take the blame for everything bad in society and the family; it is the men who have not kept their promises. According to Promise Keepers and the fatherhood responsibility movement, this perspective is, or at least is close to, a feminist point of view (Gavanoas 2001a). It is the men who have failed and who are the betrayers, not the women. Consequently, it is the men who need to change their behavior – above all through taking greater responsibility in the family.

But what has changed, then, between the 1980s and 1990s? As the discussion above indicates, the discursive field in which Promise Keepers is found seems to contain another discursive formation, one that would probably be considered to be in an antagonistic relation to it: feminism. Again and again, the movements themselves, and scholars and others writing on them, repeat the argument that the movements are fighting for the same issue that feminists have fought for in decades: increased responsibility of the man in the family. And a certain kind of feminist rhetoric is also present in the discourse, for example in the view of men as perpetrators and women as victims. In her analysis of the discourse surrounding Jerry Falwell – a Religious-Right leader, and founder of the Moral Majority in the 1980s – Susan Friend Harding (2000) detects a similar tendency. In the anti-abortion propaganda of Falwell, feminism becomes the principal interlocutor; a central feminist narrative – “women are sexual victims of men and patriarchy, and abortion liberates them” (p. 185) – is renarrated and retold from Falwell’s evangelical point of view. Women

are victims is Falwell’s narrative as well – innocent, passive girls being exploited by reckless men – and then, once again victims of a society that does not accept their pregnancies, but dictates that they endure an abortion. Harding calls the anti-abortion project of Falwell “a workshop producing born-again Christian subjectivity out of raw material provided by feminists”, and “an act of cultural domination, one in which born-again language appropriates and converts feminist language to its terms”(p. 185). This, I argue, can be seen as an example of different discourses struggling over the signification of ambiguous signs. Using feminist terms and feminist rhetoric, both Jerry Falwell and Promise Keepers take advantage of the contingency in signs, and thus ascribe new meaning to them. In other words, a disarming of the subversive elements within the feminist discourse takes place through the incorporation of – previous feminist – moments, with new chains of equivalence into the counter-discourse, the discourse of the conservative men’s movement. When the sign “man” is connected to “not taking responsibility”, to “missing father”, to “having no contact with his feelings”, or being a “perpetrator”, the result is sometimes confusingly similar to feminist argumentation.

Invisible woman

Why, then, is this not a feminist narration? The answer to this is to be found at the nodal point of the discourse, by “man”, and in the dichotomous relation within which “man” is part; in the – strikingly often, hidden – assumptions about “woman”. Above, I argued, like Gavanoas, that women, in contrast to the family debate of the 1980s – are *not* the “bad guys” according to Promise Keepers. But, then, what are they?

Promise Keepers does not want to talk about women at all: Promise Keepers concerns fundamentally men only. On the website, the question of what Promise Keepers considers women’s roles to be is answered as follows:

The role of women is not a topic we address at our events; however, we do believe husbands are called to love their wives just as Christ loved the church. (Ephesians 5, 25.)

(www.promisekeepers.org/faqs/issue/faqsissu22.htm)

The biblical reference in the above citation is to the passage where women are exhorted to “be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5, 22–23). Promise Keepers, however, has chosen to refer to the following verse. Here it says that the man is exhorted to love his wife as Christ loved the church. The choice of verse seems at first somewhat odd; the concern here was after all women’s role, not men’s. Why not, then, refer to the earlier verse, the one explicitly dealing with women’s roles? The answer, I argue, can be found in the contradiction indicated in the statement above: Promise Keepers argues that it does not talk about women, but as the “however” indicates, it simultaneously does. But Promise Keepers’ view on women is only conveyed through its view of men, of what men’s roles are. Thus, though Promise Keepers does not talk explicitly about women, its talk about men does indeed say something about women, too.

Furthermore, an inherent hierarchy lies in the assumption that it is men who have the ability and who are the ones destined to change society. Men are actors, and women are reduced to passive objects, dependent on what men do (or don’t do). This is apparent in Promise Keepers’ “Seven Promises” where women, when mentioned at all, are referred to as wives, and presented as neglected, in constant need of affection, security, protection and trust, and as getting their strength from their husbands. This hierarchy of men as actors and women depending on men’s actions becomes evident in the website’s discussion on whether there are plans for a Promise Keepers’ movement for women. Although many have asked for this, the movement states that since it wants to be “committed to the Lord’s specific calling for this ministry”, to unite men “through vital

relationships to become godly influences in their world”, there are no plans for a similar group for women.

At the heart of our ministry is the belief that, historically, men have consistently had problems living up to the role to which God has called them. Promise Keepers is committed to fulfilling this unique need by instructing and equipping men to become men of integrity.

But this will have a positive effect on women, too, it is argued, as illustrated in this short story:

One of the most rewarding aspects of working for this ministry is hearing the awesome things God is doing in the lives of men and women. As one woman wrote to us expressed, “*I knew that all of the spiritual benefits my husband received at Promise Keepers would overflow to me. How could they not? Is not his honor my honor? His integrity my integrity? Are not his blessings my blessings?*” (www.promisekeepers.org/faqs/gen/faqsqgenr28.htm, italics in original text.)

Again, Promise Keepers is cautious about explicitly positioning itself. Here, the words are put in the mouth of an anonymous woman, and the assumptions in her utterance are not commented on; that the man’s honor, integrity, and blessing overflow to her, and the only thing she can – and wants to – do is passively to receive them. A Promise Keepers’ movement for women, where she *actively* would have a part in God’s blessings – independent of her husband – is not necessary and probably not possible; the woman’s and the family’s well-being depends on the man.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented some attempts to explain the new men’s movements, explanations that stop at acknowledging complexities. I argue that from a feminist theoretical and political point of view, this “stop” is problematic. No doubt, social, political, and religious movements – as well as societies and cultures on the whole – are complex. But even complex and ambiguous features can build on fundamental assumptions, not eternal or unchangeable ones, but assumptions that matter in the here and now.

Through stressing a pragmatic imperative – through arguing that what it is dealing with is not political but rather what is best in every single situation to help people get along – Promise Keepers tries to separate the personal from the political, and thus to individualize relations and structures of power related to gender, in the family and in society. And through incorporating elements from feminist discourses, Promise Keepers at first glance appears to make a break with earlier conservative or fundamentalist discourses, but on a closer look, it does not. This pragmatism and “said-to-be-pro-feminism”, together with skillful avoidance of taking explicit standpoints on certain issues – such as those related to women – seem to have resulted in an unwillingness among scholars and others critically to deconstruct the movement’s argumentation. But the ideology of Promise Keepers is far from non-political; the man as the actor in the family, the church and the world – for better or for worse – and the woman as passively dependent is a very political assumption of gender, with consequences that need to be made visible, despite complexity.

NOTES

1. I limit myself to looking at the official discourse of the movement in this article. According to, for example, Susan Faludi, it is more fruitful to look at the motivation of the actors. There is a gap between what the leaders of Promise Keepers argue for, and what the members, the men taking part in the movement, search for, she argues. The movement responds to the men’s search for ways of understanding their “betrayal” by their “fathers”, by the society that had promised them success, and then withdraw its promise, she argues (Faludi 1999; see also Spalding 1996; Lippy 1997). I agree with Faludi that an actor perspective is indeed important, and that it is problematic too, as some critics explain the movement’s popularity merely in terms of the leaders’ denunciation of gay rights and pornography, etc. But I also argue – and intend to show here – that there is more to be found in the movement’s discourse than the picture drawn by Faludi. The discourse is, moreover,

what has attracted the men in the first place, thus, its content has to be analyzed as well.

2. Over one million men have attended meetings in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. A Swedish Promise Keepers was founded in the mid-90s, and has arranged a number of national conferences as well as smaller training camps (www.pk.nu). It is hard to tell whether the US movement has declined in recent years – I have, for example, not been able to obtain the number of participants in last year’s conference tour – but one thing is certain, though; the movement does not receive as much media attention today as in the 1990s. The conference planner is, however, as extensive as ever; the 2002 conference tour – “Storm the Gates” – presents more than 16 conferences nationwide. Whether the movement is declining or not, its way of arguing – especially its use of pragmatism as “non-political”, as I argue in this article – is not limited to Promise Keepers, but can be found in other contexts as well, for example in different family and marriage counseling practices (see, for example, Eldén 2001).
3. This text is not included in the second edition of *Seven Promises* (1999), the edition I had access to when writing this text. However, I did have access to the first edition through the Swedish translation, from 1994 (In Swedish, *En man att lita på* (1997)).

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