

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]

PREVIEW

Controversial Narratives:
Ambiguity and Multiple Interpretations of the Rhetoric of Masculinity
in Promise Keepers' Discourse
by

Bruce Creed

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Ronald Lee

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 2001

UMI Number: 3028654

Copyright 2002 by
Creed, Dana Bruce

All rights reserved.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 3028654

Copyright 2002 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

DISSERTATION TITLE

Controversial Narratives: Ambiguity and Multiple Interpretations of the
Rhetoric of Masculinity in Promise Keepers' Discourse

BY

Bruce Creed

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

Ronald Lee

Signature

Dr. Ronald Lee

Typed Name

September 27, 2001

William Seiler

Signature

Dr. William Seiler

Typed Name

Sept. 27, 2001

Dennis Bormann

Signature

Dr. Dennis Bormann

Typed Name

Sept 27, 2001

Ellen Eggers / REL

Signature

Dr. Ellen Eggers

Typed Name

September 27, 2001

Signature

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name



GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

CONTROVERSIAL NARRATIVES:
AMBIGUITY AND MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF
THE RHETORIC OF MASCULINITY
IN PROMISE KEEPERS' DISCOURSE

Bruce Creed, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2001

Advisor: Ronald Lee

Through an analysis of the narrative discourse of Promise Keepers, the rhetorical functions of controversy are revealed. Focusing on the contours of conflict and controversy between Promise Keepers and the National Organization for Women, this project has evaluated Promise Keepers narrative discourse. The Promise Keepers narrative, a version of the Protestant narrative influenced by myth, muscular Christianity, and feminist opposition, is made ambiguous as it is refracted through different audiences. What has been revealed through an analysis of these competing narratives is a controversy that functions to propel arguments about sex roles into the public sphere, where a critical public evaluates them. Promise Keepers' narrative discourse is seen as an attempt to rhetorically refashion the masculine sex role for a Christian society that has been exposed to feminist values.

The investigation of Promise Keepers' rhetoric has provided insight into the theological and moral aspects of the current controversy over femininity and masculinity. The questions of theoretical interest were 1) what is the role and function of controversy in the public sphere; 2) how do ambiguity and myth function in PK narratives; 3) how does the PK narrative generate multiple interpretations, and is this a function of

ambiguity; 4) what are the implications of the multiple meanings generated; and 5) how do multiple meanings engender controversy?

PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the love, patience, and support of my family throughout my doctoral program of study. Stacy, my wife, has been my editor, my mentor, my inspiration, and my friend. Without her love and companionship I could never have completed this project. I am also especially grateful for the love and support of our daughter, Erin, who also edited, and always inspired me to continue.

Words cannot express the gratitude I owe to my advisor, Dr. Ronald Lee, whose intellectual generosity is everywhere to be seen in this document. Dr. Lee took me under his tutelage when it looked as though I would never find an advisor or complete my degree. Dr. Lee has been a demanding and insightful guide as I worked through this project. I am deeply grateful for his influence and support.

Finally, many thanks are due to Dr. Ellen Eggers and Dr. Dennis Bormann, whose classes were engaging and stimulating. I will always attempt to emulate Dr. Eggers and Dr. Bormann in my own teaching. Without their support and encouragement I could not have completed this project.

PREVIEW

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE:	1
The Rise of Muscular Christianity	1
The Beginnings of the Promise Keepers Organization	6
PK Demographics	8
The Controversy	11
Thesis: Promise Keepers and Controversy	21
Structure of the Project	23
References	25
CHAPTER TWO:	28
Defining Controversy	29
The Public Sphere	32
Audience, Refraction, and Ambiguity	42
The Narratives	43
The Character of Moral Argument	45
Framing the Narratives: The Power of Myth	47
The Nature of Controversy Regarding Moral Conflict	50
Conclusion	53
References	54
CHAPTER THREE:	57
Fisher's Narrative Philosophy	58
Components of Fisher's Philosophy of Narrative	59
Examples of Character	64

Character and Narrative Probability	67
Narrative and Moral Disagreement in the Public Sphere	71
Research Questions: The Theoretical Value of an Analysis of Controversy.....	75
The Role of Language in the Analysis.....	77
References.....	79
CHAPTER FOUR:	81
Telling the Story: The Promise Keepers Narrative.....	81
Texts for Analysis Taken from the Promise Keepers Narrative	88
Ambiguity and the Constructed Audience of the PK Narrative	111
Multiple Meanings of The Symbol of Masculinity.....	112
Applying Fisher's Narrative Methodology.....	118
Application of the Procedural Steps of Fisher's Methodology.....	120
Conclusions.....	126
References.....	130
CHAPTER FIVE:	133
The Protestant Narrative	133
The National Organization for Women's Narrative	140
Refraction of Messages.....	146
Protestantism and Ambiguity in the Promise Keeper Narrative.....	150
Conclusions.....	155
References.....	158
CHAPTER SIX:	161
The Functions of Controversy	161

The Influence of Muscular Christianity	168
The Future of Promise Keepers	173
Limitations and Future Direction.....	177
References.....	179
Bibliography	182

PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

There are many controversies around us. Daily, we see conflict and competing stories in the world, in the news, and in our lives. Some controversies touch us in important ways, especially controversies that ask us to consider the most basic conditions of our lives. In 1997, such a controversy reached its *ne plus ultra* when the National Organization for Women (NOW) declared Promise Keepers (PK)¹ to be a danger to the rights of women everywhere. Here is a controversy that embroiled millions of women and men and overshadowed the public sphere for more than a year.

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the rhetorical dimensions of controversy by examining the components of the controversy surrounding PK. In this chapter, I lay out the history and demographics of the PK organization from its rise in 1990 to the present. Then, I lay out the political and philosophical components of the controversy, and establish the template of this controversy as a guide to analyzing the rhetorical dimensions and functions of controversy itself.

The Rise of Muscular Christianity

Between 1865 and 1900, the population of the United States more than doubled; two features of this tremendous period of growth were the rise of Christian missionaries in the cities, as well as a burgeoning urban culture that promoted the growth of spectator sports (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999, p. 17). In London in 1857, Anglican clergyman and

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I use PK as an abbreviation for Promise Keepers. PKs' is used to indicate both the plural and the possessive forms of PK.

Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley wrote a novel in which he coined the term “muscular Christianity” (p. 13). The muscular Christianity movement developed concurrently in the United States and England. Muscular Christianity began in the United States in 1858, when popular prizefighter Orville “Awful” Gardner publicly announced his conversion to Christianity. Gardner subsequently used his sports celebrity to evangelize in prison ministries. This type of ministry typified the goal of muscular Christianity—to use sport to attract an audience of young men to an evangelizing message. Proponents of muscular Christianity saw that sports required a sense of ethics and fair play, and so, for them, the goals of sport and Christianity were compatible.

As the cities and the country were growing and developing and thousands of immigrants were arriving daily, the problem of directing the energy of thousands of idle young men became serious. Drinking, gambling, and prostitution rose dramatically. Men like Gardner saw sports as a means of evangelizing and redeeming young men from activities of “questionable moral tendency” (p. 25). Muscular Christians believed that the development of a strong and fit physique and sportsman-like behavior was conducive to the development of a healthy soul. Muscular Christianity quickly came to mean many different things to people, but the core connections between sport, manliness, ethical behavior, and Christianity never wavered.

To many, muscular Christianity means “physicality and manliness” (p. 15) within a Christian context. Muscular Christianity was a fitting answer to the need to direct and harness the energy and potential of young immigrants who arrived in American cities in great numbers between 1865 and 1900. The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was typical of the organizations that developed to try to meet the housing needs

of the young immigrants in the cities. The YMCA also provided an opportunity for Christian evangelizing. The influence of muscular Christians on contemporary sports is little noted in many accounts of the mid-19th century history of the United States, according to Ladd and Mathisen:

. . . the engagement of sport and muscular Christianity in the late 1800s was the result both of design and of circumstance. While much has been made of the forces affecting America in general and the development of sport in particular, less has been said of the designers, pioneer muscular Christians. Emphases on involvement in sports as a common ground for evangelism, as a means to manliness, as a method for character development, or as a basis for socialization into a competitive society assume the presence of activists who pursued innovation and change. Amid these changes, a complementary group of stabilizers was essential to secure the advances of sport in society. As the United States was developing into a world political power, as industry boomed, and as the frontier closed, muscular Christians oversaw the development of modern sport. (1999, p. 16-17)

Ladd and Mathisen's account chronicles the early philosophical blending of the philosophies and concepts of manliness, Christianity, and sports. This blending of sport and religion into a leadership message for men set the tone for advocates of American moral and political development during the mid-19th century. Thomas Wentworth Higginson asserted in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858 that muscular Christianity epitomized American development—that the ideal American society was populated by men who possessed “a sound mind in a sound body” (1999, p. 26). The

philosophy of muscular Christianity was the focus of progress for both the church and for society.

Among the developments that can be credited to muscular Christianity are the 1896 revival of the Olympic games, the YMCA, and the introduction of sports into the curriculum of educational institutions in the early 1900s. These institutions idealized and implemented the four characteristics of a muscular Christian; “manliness, morality, health, and patriotism” (p. 16). Such manliness and morality have been the aims of many social institutions. Those who promote the tenets of muscular Christianity conclude that sport and religion have the same end, the betterment of the individual. Whether a young man is learning to play baseball or learning the Ten Commandments, the end result for muscular Christians is a better, more ethical person. For muscular Christians, both sport and religion teach self-restraint, endurance of suffering, honor, fair play, and other concepts that men need, if they are to be leaders in the world.

Some of the men who were associated with muscular Christianity in the United States between 1870 and 1930 were James Naismith, inventor of basketball, Billy Sunday, professional baseball player turned evangelist, Dudley Sargent, an influential proponent of physical education and head of physical education at Harvard in the 1870s (p. 39), and Dwight L. Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute. President Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders embodied the secular concept of muscular Christianity, and more recently, evangelist Billy Graham, while not directly associated with the movement, often used famous athletes to draw crowds to his stadium events (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

In addition to these men and their movements, other groups were formed as corollaries to the muscular Christian movement. In addition to the YMCA, two of these groups are still active today. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was formed by muscular Christian Don McClanen at the University of Oklahoma in 1954 (p. 129), and Sports Ambassadors was developed by Bud Schaeffer, a well known basketball player and evangelist of the 1950s (p. 116). The muscular Christianity movement is also responsible for the fact that every major sport in the United States today has one or more Christian ministries associated with it (p. 136).

The expression of positive manhood through sport and religion has characterized American political and religious institutions, even to the present. Two of the most often noted accomplishments of George W. Bush, our current President, are that he is a Christian, and that he is also the former owner of a professional baseball team. The influence of muscular Christianity on the development of American educational institutions and sports suggests that American society has historically seen muscular Christianity as a remedy to many of the moral and political ills of society. This state of affairs reflects the philosophical origins of muscular Christianity. Charles Kingsley and other early proponents of muscular Christianity were concerned with the character development of young men and they believed that sports training in a Christian context would be beneficial to society. Two assumptions inherent in the development of these ideas are that masculinity is a negative force without the corrective influence of the church, and that the best way to attract and direct young men's attention to the church was through sports.

The assumption that masculinity is negative and in need of sports or other physical activity to turn its energy in a positive direction suggests that masculinity's opposite—femininity—is positive and in need of no such coercion. There is an almost palpable fear in the philosophy behind muscular Christianity, of idle, misguided masculinity. Muscular Christianity turns sportsmanlike conduct into a religious goal and makes the ethical athlete the epitome of Christian behavior.

There is also, lurking in the philosophy of muscular Christianity, a fear of change. Muscular Christianity arose in England and the United States at a time of great social and political change. The mid-19th century was the beginning of the industrial age. There was great unrest related to the changing of the means of production, which is related to social and political order. In the United States, the Civil War threatened to undo the Union; this is the period during which muscular Christianity developed and was first practiced. This scenario suggests that muscular Christianity assuages the discomfort associated with great social change and that the Protestant church is the best instrument to subdue and tame the wild masculine urges that threaten social order.

The Beginnings of the Promise Keepers Organization

I suggest that conservative Christians have responded to the controversy of social and political changes brought about by the rise of feminism² by developing a muscular Christian-type movement. Thus, PK is a contemporary expression of muscular Christianity. Bill McCartney's original impetus, to gather Christian men together in

² Feminism is not a generic term. There are many facets of feminism, and the movement is difficult to define ideologically. In this project, the term feminism most often refers to the goals and aims of the National Organization for women.

sports settings to worship and pray, bears every similarity to the sparks that began other muscular Christian movements such as the YMCA, FCA and Sport Ambassadors. In fact, McCartney's partner in founding PK was Dave Wardell, Colorado's State Director of the FCA (Greer, 1996). The goals of PK and muscular Christianity are similar, and even the meeting places are similar. The resemblance between PK and muscular Christianity is not accidental, but rather the result of a sustained movement that has been a part of American culture since the mid 1800s.

McCartney's first meeting of PK was small, but, like many other muscular Christian organizations, it grew quickly. Four thousand two hundred men attended the first PK convention in Boulder, Colorado in 1991. Since then, the organization has grown; in 1996, more than a million men attended twenty-two PK conventions in the United States (Abraham, 1997, p. 18). PK is now a major movement in this country, holding yearly conferences in more than twenty major cities and easily filling seventy thousand-seat football stadiums. McCartney's impetus for the movement was Christian revivalism and its core membership is men. The movement depends upon a strong sports metaphor for a Christian critique of masculinity in our culture, and the primary goal is to bring about masculine renewal and revival in society (Abraham, p. 17). From the beginning McCartney's movement was conceived by men and was, he claimed, solely concerned with male spirituality. McCartney wanted to raise the ideal of masculine integrity in society, and he saw Christian evangelism as the means to do it (Abraham, p. 17). McCartney envisioned: ". . . men coming together in large numbers . . . worshipping and celebrating their faith together. I long to see men openly proclaiming their love for Christ and their commitment to their families" (Abraham, p. 17). McCartney's movement

began after he began networking with friends and fellow coaches, seventy-two of whom joined him for a prayer conference in 1990. From this meeting, the ideal of masculine integrity, or men who “keep their promises,” was born (p. 18).

PK is purportedly all about, and only about, men, and about reestablishing personal integrity and accountability as a way of life for men, by seeking forgiveness from God, women, and other men. The central narrative for the movement is the biblical story of Jesus Christ, seen primarily as a mythical narrative of strong masculinity, an example of how all men should live. However, from the beginning of the movement, the narrative came under attack. It appeared that McCartney gave only lip service in support of his beliefs because his personal lifestyle was not true to PK standards. Media reports surfaced regarding problems in McCartney’s marriage and family.³ It seemed that the narrative McCartney’s organization generated was at odds with his own personal narrative. Even so, the PK narrative was popular and gained supporters quickly.

PK Demographics

Who are the supporters of the PK narrative? PK men are mostly “white, married Protestants with above average education and incomes” (Abraham, p. 159). These men give many reasons for their attraction to PK. Some are confused by the contemporary conditions of masculine identity and look to PK for answers; some are concerned with the breakdown of the American family and look to PK for help rebuilding their families; others confess that they have no faith at all in our culture’s received wisdom of what men should be and are searching for role models (Abraham, pp. 20-21). Clearly, there are a

³ One of the many criticisms was that McCartney’s daughter gave birth out of wedlock twice, in 1989 and 1993. The fathers were members of McCartney’s Colorado football team (Online Focus, 1997, PBS).

number of reasons why men are drawn to PK. What is interesting is that this is the largest male-only religious movement in this century, including the muscular Christianity movement, whose meetings were much smaller than PKs' (Claussen, 2000). I believe that at least one reason for the large numbers of men attracted to PK can be attributed to the narrative of masculinity woven into PKs' message. Longwood (1999) suggests that the rites of passage as men grow into adulthood in North America are "so repressive that Promise Keepers has tapped into some deeply felt needs; the men who come together seek personal healing and self growth" (p. 13). Ironically, many of the rituals and rites of passage in our culture are sports-centered. As I have suggested, cultural messages about gender and sex roles in our country are essential to our individual personal identities. Stodghill points out that PKs' philosophy is centered upon the notion that American men face a "moral and spiritual crisis" (p. 37). PKs' message offers answers for an audience of men who have many questions about who they are. Abraham argues that PK "emphasizes specific roles for a husband and father to play, roles that encourage the man to stand up and lead his family rather than sit back and be pushed or pulled around by society's politically correct images of what the family should be" (1997, p. 21).

PKs' message, then, describes masculinity and the male role by giving men a specific role to play—the role of a masculine leader. But in reality, following the role described in the narrative is difficult because the message is ambiguous. There may be any number of interpretations of how to fulfill the role of "masculine leader." Depending upon an individual's own narrative—their personal history, family culture, and a whole range of experiences—it can be difficult to separate the PK narrative's theology from its politics. Subsequently, there are going to be liberal interpretations of the role,

conservative interpretations of the role, and myriad interpretations between these two poles.

In addition to the confusion that may arise from the differing interpretations of “masculine leader,” the terms used in PKs’ message, such as “godly” and “leadership,” may also have different meanings for everyone who hears them. These words are ripe for interpretation; for a certain audience, the word leadership is interpreted as a compellingly clear message about how to behave as a man. For others, the message may not be as clear. Messner (1997) argues that this characteristic of discourse—the sense of vagueness which leaves room for interpretation according to one’s individual beliefs—enhances its ideological power, suggesting that the sense of clarity it can give “forms a very solid ideological basis for the collective construction of an identity politics for people who share certain experiences or positions in the social structure (e.g., divorced fathers, Christian men, black men, or even, simply, men)” (p. 99). Because of the predominantly white middle class audience that has responded to PKs’ message, one can assume that these men have some shared experiences. Many men have found their identity as a PK. Perhaps it is the shared experiences of marriage, fatherhood, or work that enhance the way some men become engaged in the message, or perhaps the attractiveness of the message is directly associated with the individual’s sense of the role of “masculine leader,” relative to his identity. As I have suggested, many men may be drawn to PK because of McCartney’s status as a football coach. Many men respond to the role of coach and need one in their lives to exhort them to their best behavior. In any case, many men hear in PKs’ narrative a clarion call to a specific brand of masculine behavior.

If attendance at their annual conferences is an indicator of the rhetorical fit between the PK narrative of masculine renewal and the contemporary male experience, then PK has struck a nerve. PK has held successful, well-attended conferences or small meetings and rallies in all fifty states and in seven Canadian provinces, Costa Rica and Ghana (Abraham, p. 160, www.promisekeepers.org), and a rally in Washington, DC in 1997 that attracted around one million men (Stodghill, 1997, p. 36). In addition to the many PK events held in the U.S., religious leaders from thirty foreign countries have made direct requests for the PK organization to help start international PK organizations (Abraham, 1997, p. 174).

The Controversy

As Promise Keepers conferences began to receive national attention, controversy started to accompany news of the organization's growth and success. The first prominent group to openly criticize PK was the National Organization for Women. In 1997, NOW declared PK to be "dangerous to women's rights" in the United States. This declaration by NOW set up a female-male dichotomy between PK and NOW and focused primary attention on the fact that a women's group was protesting a men's group's presence on the national scene. The NOW declaration also shifted attention away from growing concerns in Protestant churches regarding the theological positions PK endorses.

The components of this controversy are 1) competing descriptions of male and female sex roles, 2) images and concepts of masculinity and 3) authority within society and in the home. The primary component causing problems in the controversy is the language used to describe the male sex role, and the secondary component is the image created by that sex role and the way that role translates to a position of authority within

the home. Inherent in these components are conceptualizations of how to live and be a good man based upon the long history of the interpretation of biblical writings that regulate the behavior of individuals, interpreted through the lens of muscular Christianity. Many traditional interpretations of scripture that pertains to sex roles, particularly to behavior within the confines of marriage, give authority only to the husband. Ferguson (1999) points out two methods of scriptural interpretation that exist within the Protestant church, literal and historical-critical interpretation. A literal interpretation is one in which “each word conveys a truth that can be applied today in the same way that one imagines it was applied at the time it was written,” whereas an historical-critical interpretation looks at scriptural passages in the context of the whole of the Christian message (Ferguson, 1999, p. 56). These differences in interpretation help define the difference between Mainline and Conservative Protestants; most Mainline Protestants subscribe to the historical critical method of interpretation (p. 56). I believe that it is the Conservative, literal interpretation which many women fear because that interpretation is more patriarchal, in terms of women’s status and sex role. The fact that the PK narrative is ambiguous is evidenced in the fact that both Mainline and Conservative Protestants have embraced the message. Still, many women’s groups and some religious groups see danger rather than hope in the PK construction of masculinity.

Feminist groups such as NOW see PKs’ patriarchal construction of masculinity as a means of inhibiting the social progress women’s groups have made in the past. In addition, the sheer size of the gatherings of men seems to be intimidating to women, in some way. Women’s groups have seen the overt male solidarity evidenced in the PK gatherings as a threat (May, 1998, p. 112). While feminism has had a significant impact

on the issues and ideas that are before us in this country, feminists do not gather together with any regularity or in such large numbers. The nearly one million people who gathered on the mall in Washington, DC to support PK in 1997 far outnumber the five hundred women who attended NOW's annual meeting that year (*Crossfire*, 1997). Certainly, even if PK intends no threat to women, the organization does espouse a particularly traditional style of relationships between women and men. This traditional style of relationships is an indicator of the second component of the controversy; a PK man's position of authority in the home.

Male Authority—PKs' Interpretation of "Leader"

A PK man is admonished to be the unquestioned leader in the family, community and church. As I have suggested, there may be many variations on the interpretation of this message, and at least some of them may reflect the patriarchal attitude that feminists abhor. PK men are urged to "take back" family leadership roles from their wives (Evans, 1994, p. 79). The words "take back" are significant because of what PK has referred to as a "crisis of masculinity" (Evans, 1994, p. 73). PK philosophy suggests that social conditions such as the disintegration of the family have caused men to abdicate their God-given positions of authority, especially in the family, and that Christian revival requires them to resume that position of leadership. There is no sense in this narrative that there has ever been or that there should ever be shared power between women and men in marriage or family matters. PKs' position, articulated by McCartney in a *Meet the Press* interview, is an adherence to a literal interpretation of scripture which dictates that male headship is the true means of fulfillment of a godly man's Christian duty (Dukert, 1997). May (1997) suggests that by advocating the recapturing of male leadership: