

HOPE - AND DANGER - OF PROMISE KEEPERS

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They came to pray and give their life to Jesus. They made promises to be godly men. And they shook the rafters.

The enthusiasm of 50,000 men at a Promise Keepers conference in St. Petersburg's ThunderDome last weekend was extraordinary - and a little scary. Men came searching. They met Jesus in song and sermons, and in one another. They embraced, prayed and shed tears of remorse, repentance and joy. They made promises: to build strong families, support the church and reach out to all people across racial and denominational lines.

Those promises are crucially important to mend our social fabric. And they are in the best tradition of the Bible. So why should that be scary?

Because, sadly, religious enthusiasm often breeds dogmatic certainty. Inevitably, intolerance follows the absolute conviction, and zealotry is not far behind.

Tolerance - love, in fact, of those who are different is the fundamental word of Christian Scripture. Yet, intolerance is the almost inevitable result of absolute, uncritical faith.

For centuries, Christians have hurled down judgments in the name of a God who says "judge not" upon Jews, blacks, gays, Arabs, whites, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and others. Yet the New Testament suggests that Jesus died for the very people many Christians condemn.

Christians are not alone in contradicting their sacred texts out of enthusiasm for them. Religious fanaticism of any stripe tends to be absolute in conviction and judgmental in outlook.

``There is a common denominator among many religions - some Christian, some Orthodox Jewish, some Muslim - that it's their way or not at all, and you are damned if you don't go their way," said the Rev. Richard Nolan of West Palm Beach. The Rev. Nolan is a retired professor of moral philosophy, an ordained minister and author of Living Issues in Philosophy.

Promise Keepers has been wildly successful. Full stadiums are one measure. More hopeful is the reaction of many wives who call themselves ``promise reapers." They rejoice that their men are becoming good fathers, husbands and church members.

Founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, the former head football coach at the University of Colorado, the nondenominational, Protestant movement will touch more than 700,000 men in 13 stadium conferences this summer, according to Joe Potts, manager of the Florida office.

The women's movement, a changing economy, affirmative action and a spiritual malaise among men are among the complex currents that feed the popularity of Promise Keepers. ``Men have begun to think they

are a subspecies of the race," said the Rev. Larry Krewson, associate pastor of Good Shepherd United Methodist Church in West Palm Beach. ``At the same time, there has been a time of searching for the spiritual."

Promise Keepers is clearly well-intentioned. Men are called - in the name of Jesus - to a high standard of integrity in their personal lives, their families and communities. But the premise of that integrity is complete submission to the will of Jesus as Promise Keepers understands him. The message, implied in sermon after sermon in St. Petersburg, is that only those who embrace the Promise Keepers' interpretation of Scripture will be saved.

A T-shirt worn at the conference said it the way T-shirts often do, with an ``in your face" statement that leaves no room for discussion:

Turn or burn

Try or fry

Live or die

It's a no-brainer.

Simple answers and absolute trust are a popular solution to the dilemma of life. They are also a dangerous combination because they are the tools of tyrants, religious charlatans - and genuine saints.

Promise Keepers projects a sense of absolute certainty in the midst of an ambiguous world and offers seven simple solutions. That may explain its popularity in a complex, terribly confusing time, but it rings of self-righteousness. To Promise Keepers, their view of Jesus is the only valid view - that Jesus is the only way to full life and salvation. One wonders about the lot of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, the honest agnostic and countless other Christians.

The place of women in the Promise Keepers universe is at least open to question. Women are to be honored, cared for, valued and led. They are to take their proper place, subject to their husbands. Promise Keepers' view of homosexuality, however, is not open to question. Homosexuality is a sinful abomination. One preacher at the ThunderDome, the Rev. T.D. Jakes, prayed, in the same sentence, that God would deliver drug addicts and homosexuals in Jesus' name.

Yet Scripture, according to many biblical scholars, claims that God has embraced the entire world in his forgiving love - Jew, gentile, saint, sinner, Christian or not. Christians claim to follow one who said very clearly that he came not to judge but to give life, to forgive, to heal, to love and to draw people together that all might be one.

Jesus was admittedly hard on the Pharisees. They were the religious enthusiasts of the day, good citizens and faithful Jews who raised their children with integrity. Hypocrites, Jesus called them. He preferred those whom society scorned, people who were different, those whom many religious people are quick to condemn. They were the people with whom Jesus ate, drank and shared jokes, whom he loved and forgave. Those are the people for whom he died, the Bible says. That's reason for enthusiasm - a Greek word that means ``in or inspired by God."

So how can Christians be enthusiastic - in Christ - with the conviction and energy Promise Keepers generates and avoid the danger of dogmatic intolerance? By not insisting on a narrow understanding of a limitless God and calling that Good News.

Jesus was the only one who ever understood the broad dimension of the Gospel, according to an Orthodox Christian layman I know who wrestles with biblical truth. The Gospel for Jesus, he said, is this: ``I love you, Jesus said, and I have a way for you that will lead to fullness of life. If you choose not to follow it, I love you.''

Promise Keepers holds great promise for men, their families and their communities, if the movement can resist the seductive lure of a T-shirt mentality. And there is a way.

Follow him.

Steve Gushee, an Episcopal priest, covers religion for The Palm Beach Post.