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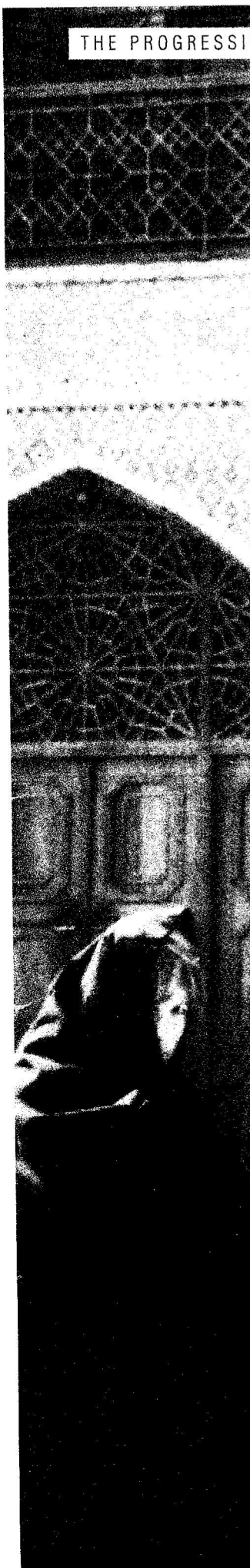
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Born Again?

Once Is Enough, Thank You

by Richard Newman

In medieval Europe, when the Roman Catholic church was at its most powerful, to be a man of Christ was to be a man of integrity—honest, caring, responsible, accountable for one's actions. At the Promise Keepers' October rally in Washington, D.C., hundreds of thousands of men gathered to pledge that their manhood "collectively and individually" would embody those very qualities. On the surface, it's difficult to find fault with this agenda. Who could argue that men, as a group, don't need to be less violent and abusive, more committed to our families, and more concerned about the moral and ethical content of our culture than we have been? Or that redefining manhood around a core of such values isn't a worthwhile goal? The hitch is that this manhood, as defined by the Promise Keepers, requires both that men accept Jesus Christ as the messiah, and that we assume once more the position of power and privilege reserved for us in the biblical model of male dominance. Only then, the Promise Keepers argue, will the possibility of a just and humane society become truly achievable.

The belief that justice and humanity depend on women's subordination to men clearly requires rebuttal. But it is important that we not become distracted from the larger ideology by which the Promise Keepers are driven: the belief that the world should be remade in the image of their Christianity. More than a world in which men lead and women follow, in other words, the Promise Keepers want one in which Christian manhood defines the standard by which all other ways of being are judged. In the Middle Ages, the "Soldiers of Christ" crusaded for a similar world.

It was in just such a world that

Jewish men could neither own land nor hold public office. They were excluded from many professions and were denied the right to obtain academic degrees. Just about every avenue of Christian male privilege was closed to Jewish men on the grounds that they could not be trusted because of their refusal to accept the truth of Christ. These qualities, dishonesty and deceitfulness, were additionally significant because they were the very same qualities commonly attributed to women as descendants of Eve. And just like women, Jewish men were believed to have been punished with the "curse" of menstruation. So not only were Jewish men seen as afflicted with a fundamental psychological flaw that made it spiritually impossible for them to be men of Christ, they were also seen as physiologically female—as the antitheses of true men.

It's tempting to dismiss this bit of biological absurdity as the ignorance of a bygone age. But, as Sander Gilman points out in *Jewish Self-Hatred*, this identification of the Jewish male as female was used to give credence to perhaps the most pernicious and deadly canard of Jew-hatred ever invented: the blood libel. This was the myth that Jews ritually murdered and drank the blood of Christian children. Dating back to twelfth-century England, when the Jews of Norwich were accused of showing their contempt for Jesus by allegedly crucifying a Christian boy, blood libel accusations have led to the torture and murder of countless Jews. As recently as 1882, *La Cruilla Cattolica*, the semi-official journal of the Vatican, described ritual murder of Christian children as a normal part of Jewish life.

In the thirteenth century, Jews were

understood to need Christian blood not as a sacrament but as a cure for Jewish male menstruation. As Gilman reports, Thomas de Cantimpré—an anatomist who cited as his authority no less a personage than St. Augustine—explained that the Jews had begun the practice of ritual murder when one of their prophets mistakenly declared that they could remove "the curse" from Jewish men only by *Christiano sanguine*, the blood of a Christian, rather than by *Christi sanguine*, the blood of Christ. The only way Jewish men could remove the curse of physiological femininity and attain manhood, in other words, was by recognizing Jesus as the messiah, thereby becoming (real) men of Christ.

The Promise Keepers have neither revived the blood libel nor suggested that men who choose not to follow Christ are anything less than manly. In fact, they've taken pains to oppose the denigration of other faiths. Nonetheless, the Promise Keepers' vision of manhood is essentially the same as the one held by the thirteenth-century Church. To put it in personal terms: As a man who is not interested in taking back my traditional role as the head of the family and who is also unmoved by the notion that Jesus is my personal savior, I represent the antithesis of the kind of manhood the Promise Keepers stand for. How can they see me as anything but emasculated? How can they not see me and other men like me in the same way that my forefathers were seen by the medieval Church, as a feminizing stain on the body of the world? How can the Promise Keepers not believe at some level of their being that it's their Christian duty to wipe that stain away?

"God," the Reverend Billy Graham told the Promise Keepers in Washington, "is calling us to a battleground, and we are in the center of the battle." Make no mistake about it, even if Graham is not calling for literal bloodshed, he is talking about a war against non-Christian ways of being. As a Jewish man, therefore, it's difficult for me not to become a little paranoid, hearing in Graham's message the rhetoric that justified the Inquisition, the Crusades, the pogroms—all means by which some Christians have historically "defended" their faith. It's difficult not to characterize the Promise Keepers as crusaders-in-training, needing only the right leader to send them off, swords in hand, to conquer the world for Christ. I recognize, however, that this characterization—much like the feminist characterization of the Promise Keepers as

male backlash—is a dismissal of the group, defining the Promise Keepers as an all-too-familiar enemy that needs, simply, without much comment, to be defeated. This approach seems to me a mistake, not because it's wrong, but because it's too narrow. We need to see the Promise Keepers' call to Christ as an opportunity. In its public endorsement of the connection between religious and gender elitism, the group demonstrates more concretely than just about any other element of conservatism in this country how deeply rooted male dominance is in our social, cultural, political, and spiritual institutions. It also illustrates how much those institutions have depended on male dominance for their survival. More to the point, the Promise Keepers are a prime example of how the question of male dominance is not only

one of men's power, women's powerlessness, and the gender inequities resulting from the imbalance. In their explicit definition of manhood as inherently Christian, they also show how male dominance depends on a division of the world into those who are and those who are not "real men." The Promise Keepers' call, in other words, should be seen as a challenge to us all, but to men in particular, to find nondivisive ways of addressing the question of manhood. Only when that question is resolved will we be able to fulfill the promise of a society in which men and women share equally in the rights and opportunities of human existence.

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Newman, a professor at Nassau Community College, NY, is writing a book, Evolving Manhood: An Autobiographical Meditation.

▼ It's a Boy!

by Cheryl A. Passalaqua

I'm lying on my back, my distended abdomen eclipsing my feet. Sitting next to me, the father is holding my hand in the darkened room while the technician plays with the knobs on her machine. The only noise comes from this machine, which purrs with an indifferent arrogance, completely unaware of its importance.

Women exit this room in ecstasy with the news of a healthy fetus; in gut-wrenching agony with the discovery of defects. I behold this interpreter of uterine secrets with both fear and admiration.

The technician picks up the paddle, smears cold gel on it, and warns me of its temperature with an apologetic tone. While she adjust knobs and probes with the paddle, we exchange small talk.

"The brain looks good," she says unemotionally, as if thinking aloud. "See the

spinal cord? It looks good."

She proceeds to inform us that everything is where it should be.

"Can you see the sex organs?" I ask, afraid of the answer.

She swings the slimy paddle into position and probes again. "Are you sure you want to know?" she says.

We both nod eagerly.

"See this here? That's the penis and scrotum. It's a boy."

A boy. My eyes well with tears. The father squeezes my hand and mumbles, "I'm sorry."

The tech looks puzzled. After all, she has informed us that the baby is perfectly healthy, and news of a son is usually met with enthusiasm.

"We have two boys already," the father explains. I am devastated. I want a daughter. I want one so badly that I have risked a third pregnancy for the chance to have a

daughter. A daughter. I lie on the table and weep. The father does not know what to do, what to say, so he continues to hold my hand. I want to punch him for his abundance of Y-chromosome sperm.

In the car we are sullen, our moods fusing with the Boston February sky. We are each wrapped in our thoughts about this baby. I know he is concerned about my mental state at this point, so I reach over, squeeze his hand, and offer a conciliatory grin. There is nothing we can do about it now. "Want some lunch?" he asks.

"I have to get back to work," I inform him. For once, I have no appetite. The news travels quickly throughout our network. Friends from around the country call and offer their condolences. "Just think, you'll never have to pay for a wedding!" (An ancient tradition I disagree with.)

"You'll have three little boys who'll adore you. You will be their ideal of a