

GOD’S BLAST FROM THE PAST: PROMISE KEEPERS

“Iron sharpeneth iron; So a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”

Proverbs 27:17

“Our generation put a man on the moon; this generation has put a man in the girl’s bathroom.”

Mario Murrillo

A week ago today, I was walking through the North Myrtle Beach Boulineau’s IGA, following a meeting of a local Christian men’s group Bible study meeting. It had been a fantastic gathering: songs, testimonies, and a report on a local Christian educational effort sponsored, in part, by the group.

I was heading toward the parking lot with a man named Dan. He also had attended the meeting. He was a bit older than me.

“What a wonderful meeting,” I said.

“Yes indeed,” he replied, “reminds me of the old Promise Keepers’ meetings.”

Suddenly, it seems like many of the men around me are talking about Promise Keepers. What was Promise Keepers? In brief, it was an evangelistic Christian men’s organization founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, then head football coach at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado, that ended (for all intents and purposes) after a massive men’s rally on the National Mall in Washington D.C., in early October 1997. At the time, it was a men’s movement that our country desperately needed. The non-profit, non-denominational movement was dedicated to calling men to personal piety, equipping them to share their faith in Jesus Christ more openly, urging them to become more godly fathers and husbands at home, and encouraging men to pray for their country. During those years, the most widely publicized events held by the organization were mass rallies held at football stadiums and similar venues.

“I still remember a rally at RFK Stadium in Washington D.C.,” Dan recalled, “one side of the stadium shouted, ‘Jesus Christ,’” he said, “while the other side shouted ‘Is Lord!’”

That, in a nutshell, describes the Promise Keepers experience: men accustomed to shouting and acting crazy at a football game with no shame, were now vocal in their support of the message of Christ.

Any of us involved in those gatherings will never forget them.

The day before my conversation with Dan, Ima and I met Danny and Carolyn Kimball for lunch. The Kimballs worked at Alice Lloyd College during many of the years we were there—Danny headed the maintenance department and Carolyn the campus daycare service—their daughter attended The June Buchanan School, and our daughter Bethany was enrolled in the daycare. Our two families have kept in touch over the years.

Danny and I told stories about our common Promise Keepers experiences.

As I have written on several occasions, the campus environment at Alice Lloyd College—located along Caney Creek in a tiny hamlet named Pippa Passes, Kentucky—was a special place. There was a unique feeling of togetherness, mission, and purpose there among faculty and staff.

One of the many things that made the campus experience so special for me—especially during that narrow window of time—was a weekly gathering of a handful of men on campus. We typically met on Saturday mornings to study the Bible and discuss how we could be better husbands, fathers, and community members. Many of the materials we used as guidelines of those discussions were produced and disseminated by the Promise Keepers.

Those men, those brothers in Christ, and the spiritual truths and life’s experiences we exchanged, changed my life.

If I close my eyes, even after all these years, I can still see the faces of the men in our small group. Danny Kimball was our anchor, with his gentle South Carolina demeanor, steady faith, and ocean-sized heart. Bill Melton, our campus Director of Admissions in those years, brought his Colorado experiences and quiet spiritual nature to our

gatherings. Bob Braden added texture to our meetings with his tumultuous family life. Carl Sode, one of my former college students and among my first hires as history teacher at the June Buchanan School, had burning passion to serve Jesus Christ that was an inspiration for the rest of us. David Huff, the most gifted science teacher I have ever been around, was a quiet, level-headed voice despite a host of heart-related issues. I rounded out our core group.

We also were joined by a handful of others from time to time: Neil Nutter, a college science professor added his age-related wisdom and depth of understanding; Jerry, Bill's brother-in-law; Matt Meyers, a campus instructor; and Bobby Pollard, now the Principal at Knott County Public Schools (then our PE teacher at JBS), made contributions as well.

But it's the massive rallies I remember most. At a Promise Keepers gathering in Knoxville, Tennessee, with Bill Melton and others, I still vividly remember thousands of men singing in unison Martin Luther's Christian anthem "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

I will never forget that song.

Or the overpowering experience.

On another occasion, we took a van to Atlanta, Georgia for a Promise Keepers rally in the Georgia Dome. What an incredible gathering! There were so many men that huge crowds gathered at the nearest metro station at the conclusion of the sessions. Danny, Bob, Matt, and I decided we would walk back to the hotel. We thought we could beat the rain as dark gray-blue clouds started to gather. Instead, we got caught in a ferocious hailstorm—with ping-pong-sized ice balls bouncing off the pavement around us and pelting us as we ran—scurrying like frightened animals from one parking garage to another. We eventually made it back to the hotel, looking like a bunch of drenched rats.

Ah, but what a story to tell!

And all of us involved do so frequently.

We also attended the culminating rally of the Promise Keepers in Washington D.C. in October 1997. We took a van. My dad went with us. We slept on the floor of a church I had attended during my first tenure

with the Agency (the church is long gone, and high-rise apartments stand there now). The church was within an easy walk of the Vienna Metro Station.

I am convinced there was at least a million men on the mall that day. I can still remember the tree our group huddled under as we watched the proceedings on huge screens scattered throughout the length of the mall. It was a powerful time of unity, prayer, repentance, and fellowship with other men from all parts of the country.

As I recall, it also was somewhat of a logistical marvel: from the vast array of outdoor toilets to the food that was distributed for the assembled men.

The original Promise Keepers disbanded after that gathering. McCartney had no intention of heading a new religious bureaucracy to replace local churches. Moreover, there were nervous rumors within the administration-friendly media—Bill Clinton had been elected for a second term—and on the heels of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, that legions of Christian men gathered on the mall would descend on the White House to demand moral accountability at the highest levels of national leadership.

In the annals of church history, I'm not sure you will find another example of such a large and successful church movement voluntarily disbanding itself.

But that's exactly what happened.

To be sure, there have been recent efforts to revitalize the Promise Keepers as an organization, but it lacks, in my view, the energy, purpose and special calling of the original movement.

I can't resist telling one more story related to the Promise Keepers. In those years, there was a smaller rally in Cincinnati, Ohio. I attended with a group of men from the Covenant Church in Northern Kentucky. (Ima and I attended there while I was in law school). We took sleeping bags with us and after the session, retreated to a local church which had graciously opened its church doors for us to stay overnight. I unfolded my sleeping bag in a corner of a large, spacious room downstairs in the church which was big enough to be used for large church gatherings, weddings, and other special occasions. Around me, scattered in their

own sleeping bags, was probably at least fifty men from various churches in the area.

When I woke up in the morning, I was alone.

Perhaps I haven't told you that I come from a family of loud snorers.

My mom and dad could rattle the rafters.

In short, my snoring had chased off all my companions.

Later the next morning, as we boarded the bus to return to Covenant Church, I heard the pastor's son in the seat behind me. He described in vivid detail a loud, almost inhuman, noise during the night that forced him to move elsewhere in the assembly hall.

Along with the others.

He didn't know the source of the noise, only that it was the loudest snore he had ever heard.

I, of course, didn't say a word.