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'AS YOU HAVE EVER BEEN THE WORLD'S PROVIDERS,
SO NOW YOU ARE TO BE ITS SAVIORS':
A STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

presented by

Mary Lynne Mapes

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in History

Norman Pollack
Major professor

Date 11/12/91

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By

Mary Lynne Mapes

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ART

Department of History

1991

ABSTRACT

'AS YOU HAVE EVER BEEN THE WORLD'S PROVIDERS, SO NOW YOU ARE TO BE ITS SAVIORS': A STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

By

Mary L. Mapes

The Knights of Labor was unquestionably the most important labor organization of the late nineteenth century. Over 700,000 men, women, blacks, as well as skilled and unskilled laborers protested the abuses wrought by the rise of industrial capitalism by participating in a wide range of labor activity from boycotts to strikes. To explore the ideology of this protest most scholars have focused on the Order's use of republican rhetoric and adherence to the basic tenets of capitalism. Through the use of labor journals and reports this study concentrates on the Knights' use of Christian discourse as well as the Order's relationship with the dominant churches and established clergy. The Knights' belief that Christianity was defined by deed rather than creed provided the Order with an ideology that allowed the Knights to both construct an independent identity and critique the dominant society. The Christian ideas the Knights supported also allowed the Order to believe the labor movement would redeem those institutions and individuals corrupted by the burgeoning industrial capitalist system.

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"The emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves. 'Go, disciple all nations, beginning first at Jerusalem,' said Jesus, and then to convert a nation was to revolutionise it. An the cry rings out to every one that ears to hear or eyes to see: Go, revolutionise all nations!"

Judson Grenell
Labor Leaf
December 2, 1885

# Introduction

In 1883 a witness before the United States Senate Committee investigating relations between capital and labor testified: "I believe the labor movement includes all those forces in society which are first of a religious kind..."[1] Rather than representing an anomalous allusion to Christianity, the above statement is representative of the types of Christian references that abound throughout the journals of the Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. For example, in response to the question, "how can the toiler receive and enjoy a just share of the values or capital he has created", Nicholas O. Thompson of Philadelphia responded: "But, brethren, a new era has dawned. The Phoenix has arisen from its ashes, and we see in our Noble and Holy Order the bright star, which if followed with the zeal of the 'Wise Men of the East' will bring us to the true solution of the problem and the acme of our hopes."[2]

From the historical literature on late nineteenth century labor activity, and the Knights of Labor in specific, one would be hard pressed to find any evidence that religious imagery and concepts informed the responses of those protesting the rise of industrial capitalism. Until the 1950s, the "Commons' school" largely dominated how historians interpreted and analyzed labor history.[3] The Commons' school,

which was developed in the early decades of the twentieth century under the tutelage of John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin, described in detail the organizational apparatus of the unions, as well as the values and personalities of the union leaders. The umbrella national structure of the General Assembly and Grand Master Workman, especially the leader Terence V. Powderly, are discussed in depth. It is not surprising, therefore, that labors' uses of Christian imagery and analogies was not the primary focus for investigation.

Unfortunately, the Knights of Labor did not fare well under the Commons' school inquiries. Because the Commons' school concentrated on the Knights' failure as a union movement, they described the Order in largely negative terms. Why both skilled and unskilled laborers found the Knights an effective voice for their grievances and hopes was largely ignored. The many strikes and boycotts instituted on the local level by district and local assemblies did not receive adequate attention. Selig Perlman is one such follower of the Commons' school whose belief in the inherent weakness of the Knights of Labor limited his understanding of the Order. Rather than describing why workers of the late nineteenth century found the Knights a viable medium for their expression, he attempts to prove the Orders' unsuitability to nineteenth century America. To illustrate the unsuitability of the Knights of Labor, he compares the Order to the American Federation of Labor which he describes as more "fit" because

it accepted what he refers to as the political and economic realities of late nineteenth century America.[4]

Although the Commons' school suffered from weaknesses, the scholars who used this approach thoughtfully discussed the organizational form of the Knights as well as the limits of the Knights' ideology and activities. The most important study on the Knights of Labor published before the 1960s was Norman Ware's work, The Labor Movement in the United States 1860-1895.[5] By providing profiles of the leadership, as well as a thorough chronological discussion of the Orders' organizational changes, Ware demonstrates the typical methodology and subject matter of the Commons' school. However, Ware's analysis of the Knights of Labor deviates from the Commons' tradition. Instead of highlighting the Knights' "unsuitability" to the nineteenth century political and economic conditions, as well as the Knights ultimate failure, Ware finds the activities of the Knights of Labor a legitimate form of labor protest. Though Ware assessed the Knights differently from most Commons' school scholars, the perseverance of the Commons' school institutional focus is demonstrated by Gerald Grob's study, Workers and Utopia: a Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement 1865-1900, published in 1961.[6] Even though Grob addresses divisions between the leaders and the rank and file, he largely relied on the Commons' school methodology of focusing on the organization of the union and its leaders. Like Perlman, he also critically analyzed the Knights' failure as

a labor organization by arguing that they pursued misguided reform goals. The belief that the Knights were a backward looking organization became fully entrenched in the historical record due to this scholarship.

Labor historians writing in the 1960s and 1970s reacted against the Commons' school institutional focus on national unions and leadership by enlarging the subject of study to workers and working class culture. Workers previously ignored by labor historians, such as women, blacks, and those unaffiliated with unions, became important subjects of study. Greater emphasis was also placed on the cultural, political, and social milieu in which working class dissent arose. E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman are two forbearers of this new cultural approach to labor history.[7]

The subject of working class culture continues to predominate the work of labor historians. Recent scholars have argued that the logic and legitimacy of working class beliefs and goals can be illuminated by exploring the culture, as well as the ideology and rhetoric, of working people. Rather than employing a static definition of class consciousness, these historians have attempted to investigate how and why the workers' goals and ideas found resonance within their specific cultural milieu. Leon Fink has used the term 'movement culture' to identify this new perspective on labor history.[8] He argues that the movement culture approach is unique for it recognizes the existence of a vital and distinctive working class cultural experience.

Like the labor scholars of the 1960s and 1970s, current historians have continued to study culture. However, they have begun to place greater emphasis on the role of rhetoric and discourse as constitutive parts of culture and ideology. Language, not merely as words but as systems of meaning, has been designated as a topic worthy of study. The writings of Michel Foucault, and Dominik LaCapra have clearly contributed to this new direction in labor history. Foucault has been the most prominent scholar involved in determining the definition of the somewhat ambiguous, but popular word, discourse. By placing power and knowledge at the center of his conceptualization of discourse, Foucault has given scholars a definition that allows them to uncover the contest and conflict involved in power relations among people. Foucault's assertion that discourses are achieved and unified through conflict, rather than consensus, provides historians with a helpful way to understand the power and uses of language.[9] Dominik LaCapra has added to the discussion on discourse by his work, History and Criticism.[10] Highlighting the historian's predilection to oppose science as the anti-rhetoric, and rhetoric as merely persuasive uses of language, allows LaCapra to develop a wider definition of rhetoric that concentrates on dialogue. Because historians are engaged in a dialogue with the past, through their evidence, LaCapra encourages historians to develop approaches to the past that will reflect a dialogic inquiry rather than a monologic discourse. Feminist scholars have made significant

contributions to the new focus on discourse through their exploration of the social construction of gender. Joan Scott, as well as many others, have argued that gender be recognized as one of the most significant ways in which people use difference to construct meaning.[11] Although labor historians have been reticent to recognize the gendered construction of meaning, feminist scholars produced innovative and challenging scholarship.

Although the focus on discourse has achieved a legitimate and highly respected place in labor history, many scholars continue to question its utility. Bryan Palmer has provided the most insightful critique in his work, Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History.[12] He aptly warns historians that the traditional marxist oriented materialist inquiry into the working class experience must not be superseded by a focus on discourse. Scholars attempting an analysis of discourse would benefit greatly to heed his advice. However, the most successful historians analyzing rhetoric have illustrated that discourse analyses need not exclude materialist analyses and can even lead to a greater understanding of material conditions.

Analysis of discourse and rhetoric has greatly affected the way scholars study American history in general, and protest in specific. Because republicanism has been identified as the most important ideological and cultural discourse of protest in nineteenth century America, it has

been studied by many historians. Discourse includes much more than words, however, for it includes non-discursive activities. For example, in Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850, Sean Wilentz illustrates how republicanism was a valuable form of identification for mid-nineteenth century New York laborers by describing their participation in cultural public events.[13] Leon Fink argues that the Knights also generally believed that they were re-vitalizing basic American principles. According to Fink, the Knights used the language and meaning of republicanism to criticize the widening class differences and develop a distinctive value system that gave their organization the authority, right, and possibility to critique the emerging industrial capitalist system.[14] Unfortunately, neither Fink nor Wilentz fully explain how and why republicanism appealed to immigrant workers. Obviously republicanism was not the only cultural discourse, other ideas might also have proven meaningful to both native born and immigrant workers. Christianity is one such issue that must be explored to gain a fuller sense of the ideology and culture of laborers.

Most labor historians who study working class culture have consistently ignored the role of institutional religion and Christian ideology.[15] This is surprising considering that English historian E.P. Thompson successfully emphasized the significance of religion in his monumental work, The Making of the English Working Class. To explain both working

class and bourgeois affiliation with Methodism, Thompson argued: "No ideology is wholly absorbed by its adherents: it breaks down in practice in a thousand ways under the criticism of impulse and of experience: the working-class community injected into the chapels its own values of mutual aid, and neighbourliness and solidarity."[16] By demonstrating the dynamic ideological role of religion, E.P. Thompson provides a conceptually innovative focus for analyzing religion historically.

Herbert Gutman also hailed the importance of religion in "Protestantism and the American labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age". In this article Gutman provides convincing evidence that Christianity constituted a dynamic discourse rather than a static concept for nineteenth century laborers. He proves this assertion by recounting how most late nineteenth labor protesters used Christian imagery and analogy to denounce the emerging industrial system. Because Christianity functioned as a dynamic discourse, the American working class not only confronted the dominant churches but were also able to develop their own ideas about Christianity. Furthermore, Gutman claimed that, "the 'mind' of the worker-the mode of thought and perception through which he confronted the industrial process and which helped shape his behavior-has received scant and inadequate attention."[17] Gutman argued that valuable insight into the mind of the worker would be realized by studying labor's use of Christianity. Although Gutman was reticent to express specific conclusions about the

real significance of working class Christian rhetoric, he fully illustrates the dynamic character of Christianity central to E.P. Thompson's work.

Though, as obvious from the previous discussion, most labor historians have neglected the role Christianity played in gilded age labor protest, many religious historians have provided evidence that demonstrates the influence religious thought had on the development of American institutions, political ideas, and protest, For example, many historians have discussed the impact millennial thought had on American beliefs in destiny, progress, and protest.[18] By uncovering how seemingly secular issues and concepts are often understood and articulated through religious ideas and language, these historians reveal a complexity in America's past intellectual tradition.

For the gilded age, Henry May has demonstrated the centrality of religious thought. May not only argues that religious thought was important for the nineteenth century but he also claims that the relationship between religious and secular thought is central for understanding American society in general: "It is to this dialogue, after all, that American culture itself owes much of it's vigor and complexity."[19] By arguing that religious and secular thought are dialectically intertwined, May offers an innovative perspective on American intellectual history. This dialogue is not merely abstract but most importantly, it manifests in the way in which groups of people understand their worlds.

May emphasizes that religious thought was central for the way laymen who confronted the new capitalist industrial system: "It must be borne in mind that people of this generation were reacting to these physical stimuli [industrialization and urbanization] in terms of the complex intellectual and religious tradition carried on from earlier periods."[20]

Although very few historians have written on labor and religion since Gutman and May, an interest in religious thought in American labor history has recently resurfaced. Ken Fones-Wolf, in his study Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865-1915, attempts to answer some of the questions Gutman raised about Christianity. Like Gutman, Fones-Wolf argues that Christianity served to legitimate and justify both labor's critiques and goals. Most interesting though, Fones-Wolf argues that, "religion was truly a contested terrain."[21] Fones-Wolf not only discusses how different classes viewed Christianity and religiosity, but he also describes how these competing visions often conflicted. Fones-Wolf's conceptualization of religion as contested terrain provides an innovative and helpful way to explore the significance of power and conflict in the religious thought that informed American labor.

Clark Halker has recently explored the importance of Christianity in gilded age labor songs and poems in his article, "Jesus was a Carpenter, Labor Song-Poets, Labor Protest, and True Religion in Gilded Age America." As a preview to his forthcoming book, For Democracy, Workers and

God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest, 1865-1895, this article illustrates the prevalence of Christian imagery and ideas in labor songs and poems. Halker also claims that song poetry was central to labor's movement culture: "These song-poets and their audiences established song-poetry as a vital element in the labor movement and as an integral part of the 'movement culture' which surrounded the labor movement and proffered a distinct vision of America."[22] Like Gutman, E.P. Thompson, and Fones-Wolf, Halker argues Christianity was both ideologically and culturally central to gilded age labor protesters.

Through a careful reading of various sources, including published journals and labor reports, this study will explore and expand upon questions raised by both Gutman and Fones-Wolf. Methodologically, this work attempts to utilize an approach similar to Norman Pollack's use of textual exegesis by carefully analyzing various texts from the Knights of Labor.[23] Discussing the Knights' ideas about Christianity, as well as describing their relationship with institutional religion, provides a new perspective on the ideological significance of Christianity for the Knights. The Knights will be described as a unified voice, and though this conceals many regional and factional divisions, this study concentrates on the ideas and concepts that constituted the base of the Knights' ideology. Because culture and ideology are inseparable, studying the Order's uses of Christianity will illuminate how Christianity was a significant force shaping

the Knights' distinctive movement culture.

Analyzing the Knights' use of Christian rhetoric, and their relationship with the established clergy, reveals that religion provided the Knights with a way to define themselves, critique others, and interact with the larger society. Much like republicanism, Christianity proved to be a viable and attractive discourse. Christianity might also have been especially important to the immigrants for whom republicanism was novel. Because Christianity encompassed values familiar to most immigrants, a Christian discourse might have had as much, if not more appeal, than republicanism.

Christianity also affected the Knights' moral, ethical, and economic evaluation of society, as well as their development of an alternative vision for industrial America. Rather than just using religion to legitimize their goals, the Knights of Labor actively questioned the church, clergy, and re-conceptualized important Christian ideas. Thus a Marxian approach to religion, as a unified oppressive class possession, is more inhibiting than helpful. More useful is a Foucaultian perspective which focuses on discourse, a discourse in which meanings, and the authority and power to decide and construct meanings, are achieved through contest and conflict. The meaning of gilded age Christianity was not static, or securely defined by the dominant society. The Knights therefore, could use Christian rhetoric to challenge the dominant society by constructing alternative meanings for traditional Christian concepts.

# Chapter 1

## Defining Christianity

Most nineteenth century commentators who discussed the relationship between labor and institutional churches argued that church attendance among the working classes, especially among those involved in labor organizations, had declined during the 1870s and 1880s. Testifying to a United States Senate Committee investigating relations between labor and capital a laborer claimed: "The working people that are active in the labor movement may be fairly charged, I think, with being very bad church attendants."[24] After interviewing many witnesses, the Chairman on the Senate Committee stated: "Men popularly known as leaders in the labor movement and organizations have been before the committee, and many of them have given testimony to the effect that evangelical Christianity is very rapidly losing its hold upon the masses of wage-workers in this country."[25] From his evaluation of the testimony, the Chairmen claimed that the decline had occurred among the general population of wage workers. Yet, many witnesses before the Senate Committee argued that even though urban working class church attendance had declined, rural working class church attendance had actually remained steady. Although few statistics were provided to substantiate these various claims, the perception that urban workers (especially those involved in the labor movement) had become alienated from institutional religion, and even Christianity,

was prevalent and generally unquestioned. The veracity of these claims, however, has been challenged by Herbert Gutman and Fones-Wolf who assert that church attendance might actually have been climbing.[26] Henry May similarly argues that the "Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States, at the Eleventh Census:1890" indicates that church membership probably increased during the 1880s.[27] Yet, the explanatory power of these church statistics is limited, for attendance reveals very little about people's religiosity, motivations, or attitudes. Fones-Wolf, Gutman, and May demonstrate that low or high, church attendance did not necessarily signify either concern or apathy towards religion.

Although the actual attendance of the working classes cannot be definitively established, the prevalent perception that the working classes were alienated, if not departing from traditional churches, is in itself significant and requires explanation. Exploring statements provided by people involved with labor demonstrates how dissatisfaction, rather than apathy, motivated the working classes in their criticisms of many churches. The Knights, however, did not reject all churches or all forms of institutionalized religion. Instead, the Knights attacked what they perceived as the traditional, or dominant, form of Christianity. Furthermore, the Knights' expression of discontent with institutionalized religion was an avenue for the Order to question the abuses wrought by the capitalist industrial system by denouncing the churches and

Christian ideology that legitimated industrial injustices.

Many Knights argued that the working classes had become alienated from traditional institutionalized religion because of the upper class parishioners who attended the churches and what was preached within the church walls. The Knights leveled numerous claims that many churches were increasingly becoming the domain of the wealthy. The Knights' dissatisfaction with parishioner constituency involved a feeling that they, as laborers, were no longer welcome in the church. The Detroit Knights of labor journal, Labor Leaf expressed this view: "They [the working class] look upon the churches as they do upon the mansions of the rich on our fashionable avenues- things to be admired at a distance, but to enter which and be welcome, to say nothing of feeling at home, is forbidden."[28] Individuals in the Order very often commented on the class character of these fashionable churches by discussing their own failure to don the proper attire required for church attendance. For example, Mrs. Jennie Hall wrote to the Journal of United Labor: "The man who lives on starvation wages cannot dress his wife and daughters so that they may sit in the same church with his employer's wife and daughters without giving them offense by the poverty of their attire."[29] This comment demonstrates how in the Knights' own view, clothing itself came to represent one manifestation of the class differentiations which alienated the working class from the churches. Furthermore, by referring to clothing, the Knights directly denounced the conspicuous

consumption of the wealthy. The numerous references to clothing also indicate how many Knights felt important and obvious class distinctions were becoming significant impediments to their own involvement in church communities.

Commenting on the class character of churches also allowed the Knights to address the ethical consideration and ramifications of widening class differences in both church communities and the secular society. A witness before the United States Senate Committee investigating relations between labor and capital testified: "The church edifices are becoming another symbol of that peculiarity on which I have already remarked as a product of the time, the division of our people into marked classes."[30] By arguing that the class dominated and segregated secular society was finding expression in a class segregated Christian community, the Knights increasingly questioned the social make up and class divisions of both the church and the larger society.

The Knights of Labor implicated the ethics which had accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism as the major influence causing the moral and Christian bankruptcy of church followers and clergy in the dominant churches. A laborer testified to the United States Senate Committee: "The belief amongst many, many large masses of men who nominally belong to different Christian denominations, of the power of money as a corrupting influence upon their church is very wide indeed..."[31] The Knights, however, never rejected the capitalist system itself. They could critique the abuses

wrought by industrial capitalism, as well as the values sanctioned by the system, but they never posed a structural critique of capitalism.[32] The abuses the Knights challenged concerned, most importantly, the power industrial capitalists had which resulted in low wages and poor working conditions for laborers. Rather than questioning the capitalists right to own property, the Knights argued that collectively organized laborers could counter-balance the power of the industrial capitalist.

The Knights reacted to the growth of industrial capitalism by attempting to limit its abuses and affects. They questioned the widening class differences, not because they hoped to establish socialism or communism, but because they saw laborers becoming "slaves" to the capitalist industrial classes. The Knights were also very concerned about the laborers abilities to participate in the larger society. By commenting on their own inability to don the attire required for church, the Knights argued not only that society had lost sight of its ethical obligations but that laborers, (especially women for they were most active in the church) were losing an important facet of social life. They spoke of social life not merely in terms of sociability but that which allows one to be an active participant in the identity of the larger community. The widening class differences thus tore asunder the obligations and ethics that the Knights perceived had formerly united diverse groups of people together. Rather than attempting to revolutionize the

society, the Knights hoped to reform the society so that all could participate as respected members. The Knights questioned the effects of the industrial capitalist system and it is in this challenge that Christianity played an important role.

A preacher sympathetic to labor thus did not stand alone in his views when he wrote to the Journal of United Labor: "The reason I do not exhort men to trust in the church for guidance and deliverance is because it is clear to me that the church cares nothing for the gospel of Jesus, and is in practical alliance with all those social agencies which operate to defraud and oppress the poor."[33] The Knights argued that the corruption of traditional churches allowed ministers and their followers not only to ignore the working class but to justify their oppression of the poor. By focusing on the ideology and social actions of the churches, the Knights questioned whether many dominant churches were preached and practiced true Christianity.

According to many Knights, working class people voluntarily left numerous churches because the congregations no longer upheld or promoted Christian values. The most significant Christian value the dominant class ignored was the golden rule. A witness testified to the United States Senate Committee: "They sit in church on Sunday and hear the minister of the Gospel talk about doing unto others as you would be done by, and they see their 'boss' in the pew listening to that gospel, and they find that on the following Monday,

probably, he reduces their wages."[34] By emphasizing the golden rule, the Knights questioned whether most church followers honestly practiced Christian values. Feeling excluded from traditional churches, because of the hypocrisy of the parishioners and the class character of the congregation, the Knights believed their discontent with the churches just.

Furthermore, the churches' support of ideas that resulted in social injustice further motivated the Knights in their critique of the dominant forms of Christianity. For example, the Knights of Labor rejected the dominant churches' belief in the divinity of poverty: the idea that God designed the world with poor and rich and that poverty breeds strength. To refute a sermon on the divinity of poverty, John M. Trumbell wrote to the editor of the Chicago journal, Knights of Labor: "Some great lives, indeed, have been wrought out of poverty, but for every one of them victorious, poverty has conquered a million. It is a diseased gospel and a church unrighteous that proclaims to the congregations the divinity of poverty."[35] Trumbell found that the divinity of poverty was antithetical to true Christianity. Furthermore, the divinity of poverty was biblically false according to a writer for the Journal of United Labor: "It is impossible for me to tell men that God arbitrarily rules this world; that he chooses that some people shall be rich and others poor..."[36] By questioning the origins and veracity of the dominant churches' ideas, the Knights began to implicitly challenge the moral authority of

the clergy. Without rejecting Christianity itself, they questioned the ideas supported and purported by many gilded age ministers and upper class parishioners.

To challenge the churches' support of social injustices, such as the divinity of poverty, the Knights claimed that the dominant churches had distorted the real meaning of Christianity and the true message of the bible. For example, Heber Newton, a well known Episcopalian minister who supported labor, argued that most churches had lost sight of the true meaning of Christianity:

> The well-to-do classes are not quick to see how completely the Christian Church has forgotten its Master's gospel, and become the church of respectability and wealth and 'society'; how it has become the upholder of civilization as it is, how it has accepted the anti-christian dogmas of the older political economists, and in so doing really turned traitor to the ethics of Jesus Christ.[37]

Trumbell, writing to the Chicago Knights of Labor, not only referred to the divinity of poverty as diseased gospel, he also argued, "In the true church the best worshipper is he who does the most to abolish poverty, who sacrifices most to ease its pain, who votes to repeal the laws that make it, and who will not stain his soul with the profit of these laws."[38] This belief, that Christianity manifested itself through deed, was prevalent among the Knights and the clergy who supported labor.

Connected to the Knights' rejection of the divinity of poverty, and their conceptualization of Christianity as praxis, was the Knights questioning of the theological and creed orientation of the dominant churches. The Knights believed that many of the churches' ideas and creeds, formulated years before the birth of industrialism, lost utility in the context of the new industrial society. Reverend Heber Newton argued: "The mass of open-minded, intelligent men have already made up their minds about the old theology. They find it simply obsolete. It doesn't translate into our speech or represent real thought or true knowledge of our age."[39] To determine the legitimacy of creed and theology, the Knights looked at the social results of the creed.

They also claimed that social justice was the most important way one could truly practice Christianity. Reverend Heber Newton expressed this view: "It is religion's function to waken the enthusiasm of humanity, as the love of God, and to set this omnipotent force at work on the building of the City of God."[40] Like most Knights, Trumbell and Newton argued deed and social action were important manifestations of Christianity. However, not only were deeds important they were imperative, for without social justice Christianity ceased to be real. Christianity thus was tied to and embedded in the social relations and activities of the world. The Knights ideas about social justice and fairness were conceptualized as ethics defined by Christianity.

Knights ideas about social justice and fairness were conceptualized as ethics defined by Christianity.

In defining the relationship between social justice and true Christian ethics the Knights, however, did not reject the bible or all Christian theology. In fact, the bible was central to the Knights' ideas about Christianity as well as their criticisms of the dominant churches. They even used the bible to prove Christians must promote social justice. For example, Shokespave, a regular writer for the Journal of United Labor, asked:

> You remember when John wanted to know whether He of whose fame he had heard was really Christ. The highest assurance given him was 'The poor have the Gospel preached to them'. Well, now,do you think if any one were to ask for a distinctive sign which would show that modern Christianity is really what it claims to be, could any one truthfully say that its genuineness is assured for 'the poor have Gospel preached to them'?

With the use of biblical sources, Shokespave was able to argue that gilded age ministers had neglected the true purpose and meaning of Christianity: to preach to the poor. Shokespave could hence ask: "Did you ever hear a fashionable minister- I don't care what his creed- honestly face the Sermon on the Mount?"[41] These passages illustrate that the Knights used the bible to actively, and to consciously, engage in a debate with the dominant clergy over the correct conceptualization

for the Knights' ideas about Christianity.

The Knights' conceptualization of Christianity was based on social justice, the bible, and most importantly the figure of Jesus Christ. The Knights often described Christ as the laboring deity; the humble carpenter who worked as a social dissenter. Their ideas about Christ provided a connection between social justice, divine right, and the issue of protest for arguing Christ was a dissenter allowed the Knights to establish a special and unique relationship with the divine figure. Hence the Knights social activity, including protest, was viewed by the Knights' as Christian.

Not only was protest legitimated but The Knights' focus on Christ enabled them to envision Christianity and social justice as practically synonymous. Jesus Christ and the Knights' concept of social justice were intertwined, for they discussed Jesus Christ's life as the fullest realization of Christian deed. A writer for the Chicago Knights of Labor argued: We want more deeds and fewer creeds, less ministerial conventions and more men, men who will take the age and its faults and stand up in the might and right of Jesus' life, and show men how to life, not what to think." The same writer also questioned the creed orientation of the dominant churches: "That the life of Jesus was one of deed and that he never formulated nor advocated a creed, did not get through the classical liar of any of these collegiate divines."[42] The Knights used Christ's life to define the parameters of true Christian living.

For the Knights, Christianity was a living force, daily recreated, and they criticized those for whom religion existed solely as a set of beliefs or rules to be followed on Sunday or corrupted for other ends. Although this may appear to be a secularization of religion, in many ways it constituted an effort by the Knights of Labor to reach back (and in the process construct) elemental truths about Christianity. They based their beliefs on what they saw as the truest Christian sources, the bible and Christ. Rather then manifesting itself in creed, Christianity was truly realized by deed and hence emulating the life of Christ. A writer for the Chicago, Knights of Labor claimed: "To the writer religion is a life, and Christian religion Christian life".[43] Thus Christianity and deed were defined by a condition of living and being, a continual process of believing and acting properly and fairly. Creed was important but deed was most significant for it was through deed that Christianity was lived and realized.

The Knights' discussions about Christianity illustrates that ethics and morality were important concerns affecting their movement culture and alternative vision for American industrial society. Because the dominant churches had failed to practice and provide true christian values, the Knights questioned traditional Christian ideas and actively, as well as distinctively conceptualized the meaning of Christianity. The Knights argued that the theological oriented churches had failed because they did not allow for the realization of deed and ignored the importance of social justice. Writing for the

Journal of United Labor, Shokespave passionately asserted: "I often feel that I would like to get one of these very learned men, who are so chuck full of theology that they haven't room left for even a little bit of Christianity, into a room and keep him there until he gathered sense enough to realize that poverty and misery are not part of the All Father's plan."[44] Distinguishing theology from Christianity, as Shokespave did, was an important way the Knights could propose their criticism as a Christian critique of the abuses of the industrial capitalist system. This allowed for and justified the Knights distinct ideas about Christianity. The Knights thus constituted much more than a forum for the working classes to express grievances and fight for material gain, for they were actively involved in a discussion with the larger society over the correct meaning of Christianity. The discourse they became involved in with the larger society, the clergy, and the institutional church, involved much more than strictly labor concerns.

By criticizing the class character of the dominant churches the Knights were able to reconceptualize Christian ideas. Because Christianity, like republicanism, was not statically defined, its meaning could be contested and constructed differently by individuals and groups. The Knights used the Christian language of the dominant society but assigned new meanings to the traditional concepts that directly questioned the traditional definitions. That the Knights could use the Christian language of the dominant

society to critique that same society, illustrates the dynamic nature of Christianity as a nineteenth century American ideological discourse. Thus the Knights understood that non-attendance, far from reflecting apathy, served as the basis for a critique of the abuses wrought by the industrial capitalist system and the legitimacy of these injustices in Christian thought. The Knights critically analyzed the ideology purported by the minsters and churches and offered an alternative vision of what true Christianity should be. The Knights confidently asserted that, "he is the only God that has sided with the poor and weak against the rich and strong..."[45]

# Chapter 2

## The Clergy

Though the Knights' questioned many of the ideas held by dominant churches, the Order was not antagonistic to religion. The Knights' contemplation of Christianity reflected a concern with, rather than an antipathy toward, religion. Exploring the Knights' relationships with specific ministers demonstrates that although the Order was critical of many ministers and the churches, sects, and denominations they affiliated with, the Knights felt individual and institutional issues were secondary to ideology. By consciously differentiating between ideology and the individuals who purported it, as well as the institutional framework in which the ideas were expressed, the Knights were able to question the ideas without rejecting the specific individuals and institutions. Individual clerics, churches, sects, and denominations, however, did not completely escape the critical gaze of the Knights who concentrated on proving the falsity of their ideas as the way to combat the individual corruption of the churches and ministers. But whereas the Knights argued the false ideas about Christianity must be completely eradicated, they believed the Ministers and Christian institutions they associated with were redeemable.

Rather than exhibiting a general hostility towards the ministerial profession, the Knights consciously sought to engage in an open dialogue with ministers. The Knights

evaluated each minister and church according to the ideas and actions that each minister and church purported and supported. For example, Frank Foster, (a famous printer who belonged to the Knights of Labor), was very critical of the class character of many churches yet he still argued that, "we find the church one of the great instruments, in many localities, of alleviating distress and remedying as far as possible the sufferings of individuals, though its work is necessarily limited and incomplete."[46] Not only did the Knights accept those ministers that supported labor, and preached a Christianity of praxis, they actively encouraged clerical involvement. The Knights believed that the ministers' position in society was essential for as Joseph Labadie, famous Knights leader in Michigan, claimed: "The pulpit should lead, not follow."[47] Rather than rejecting clerical guidance, the Knights merely criticized the distortion and perversion of Christianity by specific ministers and churches. The enthusiasm and hope with which the Knights embraced those clergy that practiced a Christianity of deed demonstrates that the Order could accept organized religion as well as respect clerical authority.

Unfortunately, the ministers supporting labor were far and few between. More often the Knights confronted clerical hostility and apathy. The Knights responded to both hostility and apathy by demonstrating that ideas purported by corrupt churches were false. New York Trinity Church, which allegedly owned slum housing, received a bitter indictment in the

Journal of United Labor. The Knights severely criticized Trinity church because the church, by failing socially, had also failed as a Christian institution.[48] In a similar vein, the Detroit Labor Leaf criticized the Michigan Christian Herald for arguing that, "the time has come to use Winchester rifles against mobs..."[49] In both cases the Knights rejected these institutions because they espoused social wrongs which were antithetical to Christianity.

In describing the corruption of churches the Knights often emphasized the power and evils wrought by capitalism rather than the will of individual minsters. For example, a writer for the Journal of United Labor argued: "The commercial spirit has unfortunately long since laid hold of the clergy. The spirit of dignity which once pervaded that body is apparently expired." [50] The Knights focused on the power of capital, for they believed the values accompanying the rise of industrial capitalism contributed to the false Christian ideology that had corrupted the ministry. The corruption of the clergy was presented as a result rather than the cause of this ideology. In his critique of a minister sympathetic to capital, Joseph Labadie expressed this perspective: "I do not accuse Dr. Rexford of consciously and intentionally playing into the hands of the wealthy, but his opinions only show how the source of a man's bread and butter will warp his judgement."[51] Because the social abuses accompanying industrial capitalism had been legitimated in Christian thought, the Knights focused on combatting its influence on

Christian ideas while simultaneously providing the possibility for ministerial reform.

The role the Knights would play, and the inspiration Christ and the bible could provide, in the redemption of the ministers was most clearly expressed by the Labor Leaf which commented on Henry Ward Beecher. Although Beecher had achieved prominence in the antebellum period as one concerned with social issues, he incurred the wrath of the Knights quite often because of his widely publicized derogatory statements concerning labor.[52] The Labor Leaf argued: "Surely it was the influence of rich living which caused the meek and lowly Beecher to belie his own kind..." The article continued: "He must have patience, however, and when he takes time to consider that the founder of the religion by which he receives his daily bread, was only a common carpenter, we think he will acknowledge his error..."[53] By focusing on reviving the tradition of Christ, the Knights exhibited hope for the possibility that the clergy could be reformed. Rather than dismissing those ministers or their institutions, the Knights concentrated on combatting their ideology.

The Knights condemned the ideology purported by churches and ministers but they also, most importantly, provided a beacon of hope, a pathway for the ministers' redemption. The Knights claimed that the ministers would be purporting true Christianity if they expressed the ideas labor had been advocating. The Journal of United Labor argued: "We are glad to see the ministers repeat from their pulpits to-day that

which we workingmen reiterated twenty years ago. Evidently the pulpit is beginning to learn."[54] The criticisms the Knights offered clergy were therefore cast in a tone that encouraged and even demanded individual redemption.

The hospitality with which the Knights would embrace those clergy that practiced true Christianity is illustrated by the journals' support of many locally significant ministers. The Chicago Knights of Labor printed the sermons of Revered Cole Adams in which he expressed concern with labor issues and the relationship between labor and Christianity.[55] The Journal of United Labor actively encouraged clerical involvement as demonstrated by their printing of a letter from I. Villars of Clinton Illinois in which he discussed his decision to join the Knights and preach sermons about labor.[56] Reverend Jesse H. Jones, elected Master Workman of District Assembly 35 in Plymouth Massachusetts, was also the subject of an article in the Journal of United Labor.[57] The journals' discussions of ministers like Reverend Villars and Jones demonstrates that the Order enthusiastically embraced those ministers that joined their organization. Just as importantly, the Knights encouraged clerics to become involved in their organization by highlighting socially active ministers.

The Knights were concerned with accepting ministers into the Order and reforming those that were not practicing a Christianity of deed, because they envisioned important roles for the ministers in the labor struggle. Christ and the bible

were important inspirational sources for the Knights' vision of Christianity and labor reform. The teachings of ministers based on biblical study, therefore, could add moral and Christian credence to the Knights' beliefs. Those minsters that had recognized the connection between Christianity and labor were thus often quoted by the Knights. For example, Reverend C. M. Morse was quoted in the Detroit Labor Leaf: "With social inequality among members outside the church, there cannot be religio-social equality within it."[58] By questioning social inequality Reverend Morse intimated that only equality could provide the basis for true Christianity. The Knights could hence argue that their ideas concerning rights and equality were not only socially just but ethically Christian. Incorporating ministers statements into the Order provided a firm basis for the Knights' association of labor reform with Christianity.

Although many clergy, like the aforementioned, enthusiastically endorsed the ideas the Knights held, the ministers who supported labor were an independent, diverse and complex group: while some were clearly radical, others were quite conservative. The complexity of the relationship between the Knights and ministers will hence be best understood by exploring the impact various clergy had on the Order. Rather than just using ministers to complement and reinforce their views, the Knights unknowingly limited their critique of American industrial capitalism by engaging the clergy in dialogue.

The two most often cited supporters of labor were Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore and Heber Newton of New York. Although Gibbons was not the most radical supporter of labor he encouraged the Roman Catholic hierarchy to accept the Knights of Labor as a legitimate organization during his visit to Rome in 1887.[59] Because the Catholic church held many reservations about the organization of the Knights, Gibbons' task was not easy. Gibbons recognized the rights of labor organizations and argued to his superiors in Rome that if the workers were not involved in the Knights of Labor, they would affiliate with secret societies.[60] The support Gibbons provided the Order enabled the Knights to believe that the Catholic church extended a warm reception to them. Gibbons active involvement in the discussion thus earned him much esteem in the eyes of laborers.

Heber Newton, a liberal New York Episcopalian minister, provided important commentary on the relationship between low wages and the poor living and working conditions of workers. He claimed that the establishment of co-operatives was the inevitable and only peaceful way to ameliorate these conditions: "If the co-operative commonwealth ever comes, as I trust it may come, it will come as the final generalization of a long series of integrations, of which the co-operative societies, now so much neglected, form the immediate step in advance."[61] Because the establishment of co-operatives was an important goal of the Knights, it is hardly surprising that Newton received much attention from the Order. By

legitimating the Knights' criticism of the system, as well as their goals for creating a better society, Newton occupied an important place in the Knights discussions. The Labor leaf even provided a profile of Newton in which they described him as the ideal Cleric.[62]

Even though most of the clergy who supported labor severely criticized various social, industrial and labor abuses, most, like the Knights, held a reverence and respect for capital. For example, the Chicago Knights of Labor encouraged their readers to attend the sermons of Reverend J. Cole Adams. Although Adams discussed volatile issues and supported labor, because of his dissatisfaction with the present system, he ardently believed in the rights of capital: "I do not say that all values are created by labor, for that is slander on the Almighty." To ignore what he termed the "labor of the head" which allowed for the accumulation of capital, was to slander the almighty and to believe all wealth was created by labor was incorrect for: "It ignores the reciprocity of the classes."[63] Reverend Adams expressed discontent about the existing conditions but refused to question the inherent inequalities of the capitalist system. By asserting "the reciprocity of the classes" it is clear Reverend Adams did not question the concept of class itself. Likewise, Reverend F. G. Townsend argued that, "this labor question cannot be solved without taking into account the rights of capital, as well as the wrongs of labor."[64] An unwillingness to confront the class relations was predominate

among the clergy commenting on the abuses of industrial capitalism.

The failure of the Knights of labor to discuss the inequalities inherent in capitalism has been addressed by many historians. Scholars, provide convincing evidence that the Knights did not challenge capitalism because they were unable to envision a world not defined by capital and private property. For example, a witness testified to a United States Senate Committee upon relations between labor and capital: "We believe that ultimately these questions will be settled by the co-operation of the laborers, under a plan whereby they will become the possessors and controllers of their own capital, and will eventually be the only capitalists."[65] Although the Knights often cited capitalists as the group, and capitalism as the system, that had corrupted society, the Knights sought to establish more equality between capital and labor rather than a new system of property relations. The Knights challenged the abuses of capitalism, and not the system itself, because they believed private property was essential for American society. It is not surprising, therefore, that the clergy who supported both the critique put forth by the Knights, and the rights of capital, were embraced by the Knights. In many ways the Knights and the clergy, though protesting abuse, remained wedded to the values of the dominant society in terms of the sanctity of private property.[66]

Because Christianity, in many ways, was one of the most

important moral sources for the Knights' critiques and goals, it is significant that the ministers who supported the Knights of labor ethically reinforced the Knights' adherence to the existing property relations. Indirectly, Christianity was an important factor that added to the Knights' unwillingness to reject the capitalist system. Ministers considering the labor issue were among those who most ardently supported capital and believed a harmony between labor and capital must and could be achieved. For example, James Danforth preached a sermon entitled, "The Labor question, what answer shall the church give?" to Central Congregational church. He answered: "The employer and capitalist need to have intelligent organized labor to rescue him from the helpless position of one who would be either driven out of competition or compelled to screw down labor to the bare necessities of famine rations."[67]

Although Danforth's support of labor was radical for 1886, and clearly puts Danforth on the side of labor, one sees very clearly in the above statement why he argued that reconciliation, instead of class conflict, was the route for solving the problems of industrial capitalism. Without challenging the right of the capitalist class, organized labor, according to Danforth, could illuminate the injustices and thereby create the conditions for producing harmony between the classes. Because the Knights envisioned themselves as practicing the true Christianity, they believed that they could establish this harmony. By educating the

society of the correct Christian principles the Knights would achieve society-wide redemption through education.

The Knights criticized specific clergy, and highlighted what they saw as their false ideas, because the Knights hoped to provide the possibility for the reformation of the clergy. The relationship between the Knights and ministers was very important, for after the ministers were reformed they would be able to take leading roles in the labor struggle. The clergy also had a great impact on the ideology of the Knights in reference to capitalism. While not the source for the Knights' reverence for private property, the clergy certainly ethically reinforced the Knights' vision that they could reform the capitalist system so that all could achieve the status of an individual producing capitalist.

# Chapter 3

## The Labor Missionary Social Movement

Although the Knights enthusiastically supported those clergy that preached a Christianity of deed, the Knights claimed that most institutional churches had failed to provide true Christian moral leadership. However, the Knights' distinct conceptualization of Christianity as praxis allowed the Knights to seek Christian guidance outside of the traditional boundaries of the church. The possibility of this was expressed by Mary Barker who wrote to the editor of the Journal of United Labor: "But thanks to that Allwise Creator people can grow in good and spiritual knowledge outside the church, for they have the love of humanity at heart, and this love creates a wisdom born of its own divinity..."[68] Although churches traditionally had existed as the center for Christianity, many Knights, such as Mary Barker, believed the churches were not essential for practicing Christianity. A witness testifying to the United States Senate Committee also agreed: "I believe that men are religious creatures, and if they cannot get the Gospel carried out to suit them in one church they will institute some Gospel that will suit them."[69] Even though the Knights hoped that the clergy would provide true Christian leadership, this did not discourage the Knights from searching for new institutions outside of the church that they could identify as Christian.

The institution that they saw most fully embodying true Christian values was their own organization, the Knights of Labor. An individual before the United States Senate Committee argued: "I believe the labor movement includes all those forces in society which are first of a religious kind..."[70] The Knights not only had practiced Christianity, but was also based on Christian values according to Wilbur F. Crafts, who wrote that the Knights of Labor, "has set up an ideal that was born of Christianity."[71] Because the Knights believed that their organization had internalized and practiced Christian values more fully than most traditional Christian institutions, the Order claimed the right to provide Christian moral guidance. The Chicago Knights of Labor claimed: "It is not a church nor even a religious association in the common acceptance of the term; yet it has done more to permeate and saturate the people of the United States with a living faith in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man- the bottom rock of Christianity- than have all the churches and all religious associations."[72] Rather than merely replacing the institutional churches, the Knights would question the social apathy of the dominant churches by arguing that all social issues were Christian concerns and they would also claim that the forum for practicing Christianity was both within the church building as well as outside in the larger world.

The Knights' argument that they, rather than religious institutions, had fully promoted Christianity enabled the

Knights to conceptualize themselves as much more than mere labor protesters. The Knights envisioned themselves as embodying and advocating the moral ethics that should constitute the moral base for society. In many ways, therefore, the Knights envisioned their labor movement as a social reform movement. A Knights of Labor book of ritual and regulation states: "As you have ever been the world's providers, so now you are to be its saviors".[73] The belief they were carrying on and re-vitalizing the Christian reform tradition of Christ provided the moral inspiration for their reform role.

Many historians have noted the prevalence of Christ analogies in working class writings, but few scholars have seriously considered the significance of religious rhetoric in American labor history. Yet, it is by analyzing the Knights' use of rhetoric, that it becomes evident that the Knights envisioned themselves as participants in a biblical Christian reform tradition. "Old Honesty", a regular writer for the Chicago Knights of Labor, often used biblical analogies. He stated: "The world has always been unjust to the laboring classes. Christ must have been a true Knight of Labor, being a carpenter's son: He was master of His father's trade. And this proves that all Knights of Labor should become Christ-like."[74] The Christ analogy was significant for "Old Honesty" clearly associated the Knights with a longer tradition that included all laboring classes. Not only was Christ the most important laborer in this tradition, but he

was "the true Knight of Labor". This analogy, therefore, clearly placed the Knights of Labor within a Christian reform tradition that gave the Knights moral legitimacy and provided the Order with a providential role in history. The Knights used Christ analogies both to identify workers as Christians and illuminate Christ as the ideal laborer. For example, the Detroit Labor Leaf stated: "Something over 1800 years ago the terms 'demagogue', 'disturber of the peace', 'raiser of sedition', and others of similar meaning, were hurled by the respectable classes against the prominent reformer of the age."[75] By describing Christ as an agitator, who challenged the status quo, the Knights legitimated social action and identified the class issue as a moral concern, social issue, and religious question. Because the Knights identified labor issues as moral concerns, they could argue that they were re-vitalizing Christianity. The Detroit Labor Leaf even claimed that the social reform of the Knights was a continuation of Christianity: "The battle for humanity has been raging now for two thousand years, and who can say the world is not better for the struggle? The labor movement is but another name for Christianity and the efforts of both in the cause of humanity are making progress."[76] The Knights' re-conceptualization of Christianity as praxis allowed them to argue their purpose was to institute Christian principles. To legitimate their social concern, the Knights identified labor protest as Christian social reform, and by so doing, envisioned themselves as reformers.

As a reform movement, the Knights did not direct their attention solely at the laboring classes. Rather, they argued it was their role to reform the entire society. The Knights, in both essays and poems, presented themselves as society-wide moral reformers. Francis M. Goodwin, Master Workman of local assembly 8378, submitted the following poem to the Journal of United Labor:

> Then let us labor one and all
> To spread the truth, at duty's call:
> To organize, and then install
> Our principles of right--
> 'Till justice shall be done anew
> To all mankind, and not the few:
> Till outraged labor gets her due
> And then we'll end the fight.[77]

The belief that the Knights of Labor would institute "principles of right" for all in society was prevalent.

A writer for the Journal of United Labor asserted that the Knights' social reform mission was providential: "In the fullness of time it [labor] came, as messiahs have ever come-when the world was ready for them, could receive them; as every epoch has come..."[78] The Knights' providential labor reform also contained a postmillennial dimension. For example, a writer for the Chicago Knights of Labor claimed: "Justice will be done when all the laboring men of the country become true Knights and understand thoroughly the principles of their Order; religion will become sacred, temperance and

industry will become co-workers, and God will no longer repent of having created man."[79] The Knights' belief that their labor movement would result in an age of perfectionism was commonly expressed by many of the Orders' leaders as well as in the rank and file. Although many social movements believe in perfectionism, it is significant that the Knights used explicitly Christian language to discuss not only the millennial future but their role as providential reformers. Christian imagery and inspiration thus provided the framework through which the Knights saw their place in history as Christian social reformers working towards the millennium.

Although the Knights of labor was a late nineteenth century labor organization, one can see from the above passages that the Order carried antebellum and postbellum reform ideas into the labor struggle. An evangelical perfectionist mode of thought found expression in the Knights' identification of themselves as providential social reformers. The Knights' belief that perfectionism would reign, once the Order achieved its goals, also demonstrates the influence of evangelical Christianity.[80]

The Knights' belief in perfectionism is important for it allows historians to re-consider the separation of reform movements and labor protest. Rather than arguing Gilded Age labor activity represented a break from nineteenth century Christian oriented reform, studying the Knights' use of rhetoric allows us to see how the reform culture was an

important inspirational source for the Order. The Knights' language, even their "mode of thought", was based in an evangelical reform traditions. Evangelical Christianity, especially millennial perfectionism, affected the Knights' belief in the possibility of society wide-reformation. By considering the significance of Christianity, one can discuss the important cultural ideas that contributed to the Knights' ethos. Evangelical Christianity thus provided the Knights with a vision and language to question and confront industrial capitalism.

One might argue that the Knights' abstract analogies, references to Jesus Christ, and vision of their organization as a social movement, had little impact on important specific labor issues. However, an exploration of the language the Knights used to articulate grievances and goals reveals that the Knights, as social reformers, used Christian rhetoric to legitimate substantive demands.

Biblical references were used to discuss a variety of issues as well as legitimate labor activities. A writer for the Chicago Knights of Labor provided a biblical legitimation for boycotts by discussing boycotts as part of the biblical past: "Turn to Matthew xviii, verse 15, in your Bible, and we will find 'Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him of his fault between him and thee; alone..." The writer argues that if the employer refuses to listen or submit to arbitration: let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican. To be cast out like a 'heathen and

publican' was an awful boycott, for the Christian community was itself apart from the world, and to be cast out from this fellowship was to be lost indeed; despised by the children of this world and abandoned by the children of light.[81] Because boycotting was a legitimate exercise used by the biblical Christians, the Knights could claim it was a divinely sanctioned form of labor protest. The Knights' decision to cite such traditions is important for it illustrates how Christianity could legitimate activities that were questioned by the larger society.

Both Christian and republican rhetoric lent important credence to the Knights' critique of monopolies. To prove the inequity and injustice of monopoly, the Knights quoted Thomas Jefferson and argued that all should inherit land from God the father. For example, a poem in Detroit Labor Leaf reads:

> But 'all men are created equal'
> Then all of God's children are Heirs
> It follows of course as a sequel,
> That land, air and water are theirs.[82]

Because society allowed for, encouraged, and condoned the monopolization of resources, the Knights claimed monopolization denied God's children their inherent God given equality. According to the Knights, equality was as much a biblical gift as a result of democratic republican government. That this idea was prevalent among the Knights is illustrated by the fact that at the founding of each local assembly the "Title deed of Heaven to man" was read. The basic concept in

this passage was that, "Man, the child, must come unto his inheritance from God, the Father."[83]

The Knights argued that if equality was not achieved, both God's plans and the true order of nature would be disrupted. A writer to the Journal of United Labor claimed: That it is, from a religious standpoint, cheerful obedience to the Divine will or law, and the complete realization and practical fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer and all the other important teachings of Jesus Christ, the Savoir of mankind; that it [the Knights of Labor] is able to redeem from the oppression of labor and from poverty all who have faith in and practice it aright, without waiting for those how are willingly and otherwise blind to its merits...[84]

What is most significant in both above quotes, especially the latter, is the reference to Divine will and law. Recent labor historians have analyzed labor's various uses of republican rhetoric to articulate, legitimate, and demand changes. From the above passages it is evident that biblical references could be used in a similar way. Instead of arguing that the equality of man, and natural rights were republican and constitutional rights, the Knights referred to them as biblical rights.

The Knights' references to biblically and divinely constructed laws of order and natural rights is important for it illustrates the substantive content of often ignored biblical analogies. Rather than constituting superficial rhetoric, or misplaced hopes, biblical references sanctioned

ideas concerning equality and natural law and order. For example, an essay in the Detroit Labor Leaf argued: "I believe that when God conceived the thought of man's creation, or established laws to evolve the production of man on the earth, he intended that the children of his creation should equally enjoy all their natural rights..." Instead of identifying natural rights as political, the author argued that social material, and moral issues were included in the concept of natural rights. "I believe it is the intention of God, written in the reason of every man, that all those things necessary to life, comfort, and happiness should be distributed at the actual cost of their production and distribution."[85] By placing political concepts, concerning natural law and order, within a biblical and divine context, the author re-defined the concept of natural rights to include social, material, and moral dimensions. Although the idea of natural rights is clearly an eighteenth century political concept, that the Knights of Labor chose to associate and base the concept in biblical origins (and add moral, ethical and material aspects to its definition), is significant for it illustrates that Christianity could serve to legitimate important labor actions and concerns. The mixture of republican ideas with Christian legitimation also illustrates how together, both these two ideological discourses, could be used by the Knights to help strengthen their position.

Christian ideas could legitimate critiques of the system concerning boycotts and monopoly, as well as lend credence to

labor demands. Education, temperance, and the establishment of cooperatives were important substantive goals of the Knights. Underlying each of these three demands was the Knights belief in individualism. By becoming temperate the individual would gain back a sense of self. Through education and cooperation the individual would be able to achieve an independence not possible within the monopoly controlled capitalist world. Although these goals might seem to have little to do with Christianity, the emphasis the Knights placed on individual redemption, and the language the Knights used to support these goals, reveals that evangelical Christian reform affected the Knights' conceptualization of them. Republican ideology and rhetoric was used simultaneously with biblical ideas. By mixing them, and using them interchangeably, the Knights achieved a firm moral, rational, and patriotic base for their critique and alternative vision. The use of both discourses also illustrates how the dichotomy between the secular and the religious did not find resonance among the Knights. Though some might argue this reflects ideological inconsistency, it actually illustrates the dynamic and unique nature of the discourse the Knights engaged in to question the society and create identity for their Order.

# Chapter 4

## Female Knight Redeemers

The preceding chapters describe how the Knights actively engaged the clergy in a discussion concerning the concept of Christianity and the responsibilities of Christian institutions. Because the Knights distinctly conceptualized Christianity as praxis, they were able to assert their organization exemplified Christian values. Christianity, especially millennial perfectionism, was also significant for affecting the Knights' vision of their organization as a social movement. However, one must also consider how Christianity, and the Knights as a social reform movement, affected the actions and goals of the Order. Using Christian rhetoric legitimated critiques about monopoly and helped shape the way the Knights conceptualized their goals of temperance, education and cooperation. Yet, the most significant result of the Knights as a Christian social reform movement involved the Order's acceptance of women. Most historians writing on the Knights note the presence of women as well as the Order's support of equal pay and female suffrage, but few have explored the Knights' ideology that enabled the Order to include women.[86]

Because the Knights of Labor was a labor organization its inclusion of women and women's demands has often been described as an aberration in labor union activity. Yet, if one conceptualizes the Knights as a social reform movement,

and describes the continuities between antebellum reform and postbellum reform, the inclusion of women no longer constitutes an aberration. In the nineteenth century women were active in abolitionism, temperance, and a host of other similar issues.[87] The cultural precedents for women's public activity, however, do not fully illuminate how the Knights ideologically justified their inclusion of women. Exploring the influence of evangelical religion, including the idea women were inherently moral and pious people, however, allows one to describe the ideology that legitimated women's inclusion and made women's involvement imperative.

Although women's involvement in the Order was not always easily accepted by all (women encountered antagonism at the local and national levels), women comprised ten percent of the Knights' membership, a number almost proportionate to their employment rates.[88] To understand how and why the Order included women it is necessary to explore the Knights' views of women. Although the Knights supported female suffrage and equal pay they did not attempt to destroy gender difference or the Cult of True Womanhood, the predominate ideology (influenced by evangelical religion) that asserted women were pure, pious, domestic and submissive.[89] Rather, the Knights exalted these four characteristics, especially piety and purity, to argue women's involvement in the Order was necessary.

Women's involvement was required because society had reached a level of corruption that demanded a new intrusion of

purity. The female morality that would reform the system was described by the Journal of United Labor: "Women have a finer and more exact sense of honor than men; their ideas of right and wrong are not perverted by moves of expedience, and sordid calculations are less apt to influence their judgement."[90] However, it was not only woman's morality that made her presence essential, it was the influence woman's morality had on her ability to understand problems and offer solutions. The nobler capabilities of women were discussed by a writer for the Journal of United Labor: "While men are coldly calculating and discussing the pros and cons of a subject, women could decide by their hearts and carry the project into execution before the brothers had their thinking caps on."[91]

To argue women were more moral than men was ideologically to support the Cult of True Womanhood, Yet, labor reform activity, by its very public nature, negated the domestic characteristic of the Cult of True Womanhood. The argument that women's activity involved an expansion of the domestic sphere, however, abrogated the contradiction. The Journal of United Labor quoted Francis Willard, leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who argued: "She [woman] will come into government and purify it, into politics and cleanse its Stygian pool-for woman will make homelike every place she enters, and she will enter every place on this round world."[92] By arguing women will make the world more homelike, public activity could be reconciled with the domestic characteristic of the Cult of True Womanhood.

Because male and female gender was strictly defined as opposite and complementary, woman's inherent morality was necessary for both the private and public spheres. The necessity for women to purify and reform the world was thus widely accepted as one of the justifications for women's active involvement in the Order. For example, a writer for the Journal of United Labor claimed that, "nothing but evil succeeds well without woman's blessed influence and cheering support... her presence was always a guarantee of security against the brutal and groveling tendencies of masculine nature."[93] Without challenging gender difference, and even by exemplifying gender difference, the Knights, like most antebellum and postbellum reformers, legitimated public roles for women. Thus instead of representing women's labor activity as only an aberration in labor history, it should be discussed also as a continuation of antebellum and postbellum reform activity.

The ideological key for understanding how the Knights could legitimate women's activity involves more than the Knights' assertion that women were inherently more moral than men. By exemplifying real morality women also advanced Christian ideas, and it is this which necessitated their role as agents for reform and redemption. Christianity was hence significant for both defining and legitimating women's activity within the Order. Women's higher Christian morality was described by H.C. in 'the Report of the committee':

> Resolved, First, That we invoke on the work this day

> begun the blessing of God and His Son our Savior, who was on earth betrayed and denied by his male followers- His disciples- and crucified by the money changers et al. without a manly protest from any class, learned or unlearned- woman alone had the courage to remonstrate against the outrageous murder of the son of God.[94]

The underlying assumption in the above passage was that women know and do right more often then men. Women's roles as redeemers were necessary for they exemplified piety and could use it to change society. This was illustrated by a poem on the cover of the Journal of United Labor:

> Woman! in your daily conflict
> Wield some mightier weapons, Though!
> Wield the sword of God's great Spirit!
> And before it all shall bow:
> Scripture texts wield thou with power?
> Own and feel that prayer is might!
> And thy true and phantom legions
> Shall be quickly put to flight.[95]

The sense that woman's inherent morality would allow her to infuse the order with both ethical and Christian values was predominant.

Although abstractly and ideologically women functioned as redeemers in Knights' ideology, the abstract Christian reform role existed in tension with some pervasive conflicting conceptions of womanhood. Contradictory portrayals of women

are found in abundance in the journals. The various journals often published articles about extraordinary overachieving women in the women's sections of the papers. Women doctors, farmers, and professors, who achieved independence, received much acclaim from the Knights. However, it was also not uncommon for the journals to include derogatory, if not misogynists, clips about women. For example an article in Chicago, Knights of Labor claimed that, "Woman is the sweetest and bitterest gift of God to man." The author continued: "The devil is never as black as he is painted, and a woman is never as innocent as she appears."[96] Though ambiguous, the tension that resulted from the various messages was significant for it illustrates that members of the Knights disagreed about woman's nature and place in the Order and in the society. These same tensions occurred in references to working women. Yet, to attempt to uncover how working women in the Order were conceptualized, and received as laborers, it is necessary to explore both the Knights' discussion of working women's concerns and the ideology the Knights used to justify their support of women's demands.

The gender difference based morality that legitimated women's roles as redeemers affected the Knights' articulation and support of specific women related issues. The Knights' support of female suffrage illustrates both how morality defined the activity of women in the Order and shows how class and gender were dialectically related.

The Knights' main argument for women's right to the vote

was based on the belief that women were more moral than men and would thus be able to promote a better more home-like public world.[97] A writer for the Journal of United Labor argued: "Women, as women, will represent the homes. They are more temperate, chaste, peaceable, economical, and law-abiding than men; therefore their votes will promote temperance, purity, peace, economy, and law and order."[98] The predominate perception among those supporting female suffrage was not that they were arguing the sameness of men and women, but rather using the difference of women to redeem the corruption of man and society. The Journal of United Labor often addressed this issue: "I am asked, would you drag women into the mire of politics? No, I would have them lift us out of it."[99] Like the upper and middle class suffragists, the Knights used gender difference to argue for female suffrage.

However, the Knights' support of suffrage was based on more than a belief that gender determined woman's morality. The Knights argued that working class woman's higher morality was dependent on both her womanhood and her class position. The journals abound in comparisons of decadent "ladies" and moral working girls. For example, the Journal of United Labor printed a letter from an individual in local assembly 7817: "Females who consider themselves above work, who drive around in carriages, go to church to show their silks and jewelry under the flimsy pretext of worshiping the humble Nazarene, turn up their noses in proud contempt at the mere mention of

the name of any one of these poor, honest girls, who earn their bread in the nail factory."[100] That upper class women looked at working girls with contempt reinforced the nobility of toil and the morality of working women. A poem by a women in the Order addressed this issue:

"ladies sneer at the working girls
As they pass them on the street.
They stare at us in proud disdain.
And their lips in scorn will curl;
As they pass us by we hear them say,
She is only a working girl.[101]

For the Knights, the working woman's morality was both the result of her gender and class position. By juxtaposing classes of women, the Knights emphasized working women's morality.

The dialectic between class and gender becomes clear, for the Knights supported female suffrage because women were female and hence moral workers. They Journal of Labor asserted: "The influence of proletarian women enfrancaised would be powerful in labor legislation and social reform."[102] By emphasizing "proletarian", the Knights saw their support of female suffrage as support of the working class struggle. The support of female suffrage was conceptualized primarily as a working class demand and secondarily as an issue of women's rights. The Chicago Knights of Labor urged, "workingmen to consider the advantages to labor that woman suffrage would bring, as well as the principle of justice involved,

remembering that workingmen were and are to some extent today, excluded form the privilege of participating in elections."[103] Although one cannot discount the Knights' acceptance of suffrage as novel, and liberating for women as a group, one also cannot argue this was an assertion for women's rights without first recognizing it was primarily a way to solidify and strengthen the political power of the working class. The class solidarity of the Knights thus enabled them to use the morality of working women to redefine some gender roles.

Exploring the dialectic of class and gender demonstrates how the Knights' support of suffrage, as a working class tool, opened up possibilities for women. It illustrates how the Knights, through their critique of the abuses of industrial capitalism, could argue for greater roles for women. By contrasting women's morality with decadent ladies and the corrupt system, the Knights used working women's gender defined purity to emphasize the moral purpose of the Order, to critique the dominant system, and justify their alternative visions. Abstractly women represented the moral purpose of the Order, for they exemplified the Christian element of the Knights.

Along with suffrage, a primary concern of the Knights, in reference to working women, was the issue of sexual harassment. The Detroit Labor Leaf argued: "One of the greatest evils that women have to contend with is the presence of foremen in the factories who take improper advantage of

their position."[104] Although the Knights discussed many other issues in reference to women, it is significant that they were sensitive to the specific and unique plight of women. However, the Knights were most concerned about women when questions about morality were involved. Woman's double duty as both worker and caretaker was rarely addressed. This illustrates how gender determined and defined the significance of working women's issues. Women's issues were thus largely based on the premise that women were and needed to be moral. Leonora M. Barry, General Investigator of Women's work and wages, also expressed this concern:

> A custom is rapidly increasing in the country which means shame, dishonor and humiliation to womanhood, and I here and now appeal to every father within sound of my voice to be watchful and wary of his little daughter if she be employed in any large establishment, or small one either, where she is made to understand that the price of her position is 'that she stand in with the boss'[105]

Although the Knights' concern with sexual harassment was both significant and very helpful to women, exploring the ideology behind the Knights' critique of sexual harassment reveals that the belief women should be moral, more than regard for women as workers, defined the Knights' concern.[106]

To determine whether the Knights promoted equality between the sexes, while also accepting and advocating gender difference, it is necessary to explore the substantive issue of pay. It is frequently noted by historians that the

Knights' support of equal pay, for women and blacks, proves the Knights advocated a true equality. Investigating the arguments for equal pay will illustrate that the same gender difference that allowed for the redeeming role of women, and the support of suffrage, also played a part in the Knights demands for equal pay.

Many in the Knights argued for equal pay and some argued for it based on a belief in women's and men's true equality. More common, however, was the assertion women needed higher pay to sustain virtue and protect the wages of men. In reference to low female wages a writer in the Chicago Knights of Labor claimed: "It lowers woman's standard, decreases the sanctity of the sex, weakens the marriage contract. It creates a current of evil that flows around the moral circle, and may lead to the obliteration of all that is womanly in woman."[107] That low pay debased women's morality by forcing them into prostitution and vice was commonly discussed as an important reason for raising women's wages. Equal pay was necessary for insuring that the working women would remain pure and hence sill possess all the moral characteristic that defined her as woman.

The most prevalent justification for women's equal pay, however, was based on the premise that it was the only fully secure way to raise men's wages. A writer for the Chicago, Knights of Labor asserted that, "unless the wages of women are raised to those of men, the wages of men must sink to the level of the wages of women."[108] That the issue of equal pay

was aimed primarily towards elevating men's wages is illustrated by a writer for the Chicago Knights of Labor: "Let no working man, whatever his occupation, then be stupid and short sighted enough to say that the question of raising the condition of female labor does not concern him."[109] One cannot ignore the novel significance of the Knights' support of equal pay, yet that one of the primary goals was to raise men's wages must be noted. Though the desire to raise men's wages, and a principled belief in equality are not antithetical, most argued for equal pay without the intention of advocating true equality.

The argument that the primary goal of equal pay was to raise men's wages is substantiated by the Knights' discussion of "pin money", money earned by married women for "non-necessity" spending. The Journal of United Labor stated: "Pin money is blood money".[110] But how to differentiate between pin money and real money was not clear. A different writer for the Journal of United Labor argued: "I think it is about time that the men, men with hearts and brains, take this matter up, and see to it that their wives and daughters who do not absolutely need the work do not, of the sake of a little more pin money, take the bread from their starving sisters."[111] By legitimating poor women's rights to work while simultaneously arguing against wealthy women's rights to work, the Knights narrowed the options open to women as a distinct group. Underlying the whole issue of pin money was the assumption that a family wage (a wage earned solely by the

father sufficient to provide for the whole family), was ideal. Class was thus used to restrict options for women and narrow the roles for women.

The association of women with children, in discussions and articles on labor problems, also affected the propriety of women's work. By classifying the two together as a moral issue, and arguing the evil of child labor, women's right to labor suffered. For example, an article in the Chicago Knights of Labor, on women's work, commented on the increase of women's and children's work related to the decrease in men's between 1870-1880: "The one greatest evil of our factory system is its effect upon the employment of women and children."[112] Though not directly questioning woman's right to work, the author supported the family wage as the ideal and thus relegated women's work to a subsidiary position. Just as important, the association of women with the moral issue of child labor made the issue of women's right to work a moral concern. Women's work could thus implicitly be challenged on moral grounds by arguing that the family wage was ideal and that labor by women and children was equally demoralizing.

Although one of the reasons the Knights supported equal pay was to raise men's wages, this does not negate the Knights' support of women's right to work and right to earn a fair wage. In fact, many Knights supported woman's right to equal pay based solely on a belief in principled equality. To fully understand the role of working women in the Order, and determine whether the Knights supported equality, it is

necessary to explore how the Knights envisioned the ideal, (the end goal for women in their alternative vision). Susan Beth Levine has argued that the final goal of the Knights, in reference to women, was to institute a family wage that would allow women to return to their gender defined role in the home. "Although the Knights accepted women's wage work as unavoidable under present circumstance, they hoped that in the cooperative commonwealth women would no longer need to venture into the market place."[113] George F. Burns of local assembly 2590, thus did not stand alone in asserting: "These girls and women are not destined to remain in these factories and mills forever. Some day they will be married, and perhaps have families to raise".[114] Although the Knights advocated woman's right to work, and earn a fair wage, their conceptions of working women, labor activity, suffrage, and equal pay, were based on an assumption of woman's morality that was tied to the Cult of True Womanhood. Gender difference thus defined how the Knights saw working women and it was this same difference that dictated that the ideal role of the woman was to reside in the home.

Though ideologically and culturally the Knights' acceptance of women has perplexed historians and been described as an aberration, it is necessary to look at the evangelical Christian reform tradition. The evangelical Christian reform tradition of the nineteenth century, which asserted women were inherently moral, allowed the Knights to encourage women to publicly redeem the society politically,

socially, and economically. For a short time the Knights used class to confront traditional gender roles concerning women's suffrage, right to work, and earn equal pay without, however, challenging the belief woman's true role was in the home.

# Conclusion

Christianity, both institutionally and ideologically, was important to the Knights of Labor. In the process of questioning dominant Christian ideas the Knights became involved in a powerful discourse, one in which the very meaning of Christianity, and the power to decide it, lay at center. By questioning the dominant churches, the Knights were able to distinctively re-conceptualize the meaning of Christianity for themselves. They argued Christianity must be defined by praxis and realized through deed. Defining Christianity by praxis thus allowed the Knights to usurp moral authority and envision themselves as the redeemers of not only the laboring class, but the whole society. Because women were more pious and pure, they became important agents in the Knights' reform efforts.

To understand fully the ideology of the Knights, it is necessary to view their organization as more than a labor movement. Conceptualizing the Knights of Labor as a social movement, reform movement, and movement culture, allows one to both understand how the Knights envisioned themselves, as well as explore the influence and significance that Christianity had on their ideology. Many scholars have explored the significance of republican ideology in labor history, and it is this historical orientation that allows and demands for an inquiry into Christianity. Most importantly, studying Christianity allows access to the world view of the Knights.

Henry May has argued that, "...the recovery of religious history has restored a knowledge of the mode, even the language, in which most Americans, during most of American history, did the thinking about human nature and destiny."[115] The Knights are no exception.

Because the Knights of Labor was a labor organization, its ideas about reform and objects of reform were distinctive. Rhetorically the reform orientation was significant to the Knights for they envisioned themselves as the redeemers that would reform the entire society. Because reform, rather than class conflict, was their orientation they advocated reform goals like including women, temperance, and the use of the ballot. These goals were not divisive, rather they were conciliatory, a way to create harmony between the classes rather than domination of one over the other.

Even though the Knights' reform goal allowed the Knights to criticize the society, it failed to allow them to reject industrial capitalism as a system. Though the knights often termed the struggle as one between the laboring and capitalist classes, the Knights never truly envisioned their conflict as one between classes. The Christian reform influence allowed the Knights to describe the conflict as one between right and wrong, rather than one between classes. Reverend J. Cole Adams, a minister whose sermons were reprinted in the Chicago Knights of Labor argued: "This question of rights is a question of lights".[116] The Knights termed the struggle in a similar way because the Knights believed that once the truth

was revealed the conflict would be ameliorated, for all would have seen the light. Because the conflict was really between right and wrong, reconciliation between the classes and achieving harmony, was not only possible, but the real goal. Although the influence of pre-industrial capitalist values inhibited the Knights from rejecting capitalism, Christianity allowed them to develop an alternative vision that criticized the abuses wrought by industrial capitalism. Because the Knights believed the injustices so self-evident, and their critique divinely sanctioned, reformation of the entire society could be achieved through an education of those committing injustices. Conflict, therefore, was not necessary, for education would result in harmony.

Rather than discussing the Knights' failure to reject capitalism and class relations as proof of an underdeveloped class consciousness or conservativism, it is more useful to use their ideology to gain access to the way they saw their world. The Knights' failure to fully challenge the inequality inherent in capitalism thus makes sense when one understands the Knights as an American social movement influenced by Christianity. Yet, not only did Christianity influence their critique of the system, and their development of an alternative vision, it helped shape the way in which they could and did visualize their world. Christianity rhetorically played an important role in their conceptualization of themselves and their ideals of fairness and justice. Though this might have impeded them from

developing a systemic critique of capitalism it nonetheless had cultural integrity for them. It allowed them to make sense of their turbulent and unjust world.

The predominance of Christian rhetoric for the Knights cannot be ignored. It provided the Knights with a base value system, and a shared ideology, that allowed them to identify themselves as active participants in the larger culture. It allowed them to criticize injustices and believe in the possibility of a better future. Within the context of late nineteenth century America, during which Christianity and republicanism were central discourses, the Knights' use of Christianity allowed them to construct their own independent identity, and alternative vision, based on a conception of moral justice and fairness.

## Notes

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20. Ibid., 156.

21. Ken Fones-Wolf, Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865-1915 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

22. Clark Halker, "Jesus was a Carpenter, Labor Song-Poets, Labor Protest and True Religion in Gilded Age America," Labor History, (Spring 1991), 274.

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24. USSC, Report [1885] vol 2 p.85.

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32. My ideas about what constitutes a structural critique of capitalism

has been shaped most importantly by the works of Norman Pollack.

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34. USSC, Report [1885] vol 1 p.359.

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81. Knights of Labor (Chicago) November 6, 1886.

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83. JUL (Philadelphia) June 15, 1880.

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86. Susan B. Levine has provided the most comprehensive study on women and the Knights of Labor in her study, Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984). In The Fall of the House of Labor: the Work place, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)., David Montgomery gives a very brief explanation for the Order's acceptance of women; he argues this was possible because the organization was concerned with family and was not based on occupation Kealey and Palmer argue the Order challenged women's roles but provide very little analysis or explanation of this issue in their work, Dreaming of What Might Be.

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