

Tenor of Our Times

Volume 12

Article 22

2023

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Recommended Citation

Underwood, Jonathan (2023) "Show Us How You Do It," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 12, Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol12/iss1/22>

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Book Review: *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914-1968*

by Jonathan Underwood

Edward J. Robinson's biography of Marshall Keeble, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914-1968*, highlights Keeble's life and ministry of evangelism in the black Churches of Christ in the twentieth century. Keeble proved to be one of the most important preachers and evangelists in the movement to establish African American Churches of Christ, with his impact reaching far beyond black churches.¹ Published in 2008, Robinson's work argues that Marshall Keeble had such a strong impact on the formation of African American Churches of Christ in the twentieth century because of his willingness to work alongside white supporters of his ministry, thus making two fellowships within the Churches of Christ that reflected the broader racial, social, and religious context of the United States.²

¹ Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914-1968* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

The first section of Robinson's work describes Keeble's upbringing and influences. Marshall Keeble was born on December 7, 1878, in Rutherford County, Tennessee to Robert and Mettie Keeble, descendants of emancipated slaves in Tennessee.³ Keeble's paternal family had religious ties back to the Restoration Movement of Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell; however, his mother was a devout Baptist.⁴ Keeble moved to Nashville in his childhood, remaining there as a young adult and working as a grocery store clerk until he married his wife, Minnie Womack.⁵ Several white preachers, such as David Lipscomb, N.B. Hardeman, and Joe McPherson, helped mold Keeble as a preacher, and he became a full-time preacher in 1914.⁶ Keeble drew influence from black preachers and church leaders, as well, including Alexander Campbell, George P. Bowser, and his most beloved mentor and father-in-law, Samuel W. Womack.⁷ As far as financial means for his ministry, Keeble benefitted greatly from the aid of A. M. Burton.⁸ As Robinson closes out the section, he uses a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar titled "We Wear the

³ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

⁷ Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It*, 16.

⁸ Ibid., 22.

Mask.” Dunbar’s poem describes the African American experience of hiding concerns, fears, and pain from oppression and mistreatment, leaving Robinson to reason that Keeble was so successful in his ministry, even in the Jim Crow South, because of his willingness to wear “the mask.”⁹

In the next section of his book, Robinson describes Keeble’s affinity for the *Gospel Advocate* and briefly summarizes his theological views. Keeble often noted how important the *Gospel Advocate* was to leaders in the black churches, saying, “Brother Womack and Brother Campbell say that the *Gospel Advocate* has been second with them, and the Bible first.”¹⁰ Keeble had developed an appreciation for the *Gospel Advocate* in his childhood, stating, “It has been a great help to me in studying the Bible. I have been reading it ever since I learned to read.”¹¹ Keeble’s theological beliefs were no doubt influenced by the *Gospel Advocate* and white leaders in the Churches of Christ. Robinson notes that Keeble took a high view of scripture, placing it on the same level as the Holy Spirit.¹² Keeble also denounced church denominations and only believed those in the Church of

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹² Ibid., 56.

Christ to be Christians.¹³ Keeble also believed that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins and that anyone who was baptized without this understanding was not saved.¹⁴

Robinson begins his next section by addressing the paradox of the black Churches of Christ being supported by the philanthropy of white people and congregations, while also enduring racism from whites during the Jim Crow era. Robinson argues that “before visible ‘Whites-only’ signs appeared in society at large, they first surfaced invisibly in American Protestant churches.”¹⁵ Robinson goes on to evaluate his claims in each of the southern states where Keeble evangelized. Robinson goes on to discuss the ways in which Keeble influenced black Protestant Churches such as the Baptists and African Methodist Episcopal churches during his ministry.¹⁶ As African American soldiers returned home from World War I in Europe only to find themselves once again subjected to white oppression, Keeble used this as an opportunity to fight back against oppression and plant religious seeds.¹⁷ Keeble’s approach was not physical or political,

¹³ Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵ Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It*, 74

¹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

but instead, he “took up the gauntlet in verbal and theological contests against his religious adversaries, urging love upon both black and white alike.”¹⁸ One of the things that contributed to Keeble’s success in planting black churches was his background in debate, going back to the traditions of the Restoration Movement.¹⁹ In the last chapter of this section, Robinson highlights the work of A. L. Cassius, R. N. Hogan, and Keeble in their work to establish churches in the west in places such as Denver, Wichita, and Los Angeles.²⁰

The final section of Robinson’s book examines Keeble’s legacy. Keeble left a legacy through a “corps of young men”²¹ whom he shared the gospel. Robinson names men such as Luke Miller, John Vaughner, and Lonnie Smith who all carried on Keeble’s evangelistic mission.²² Keeble’s “sons” gave birth to spiritual “grandsons,” largely responsible for founding the Nashville Christian Institute.²³ Marshall Keeble’s legacy and impact is far-reaching and multigenerational.

Robinson successfully supports his thesis that Keeble’s evangelistic success as a preacher was because of his willingness

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 120-133.

²¹ Ibid., 137.

²² Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It.*, 137-154.

²³ Ibid., 155.

to work alongside white leaders and philanthropists within the Churches of Christ, but that this partnership created a racial paradox within the Churches of Christ that reflected the broader racial, social, and religious context of the Jim Crow era. First, Robinson uses a great deal of primary sources to support his claim, especially articles published by Keeble and others in the *Gospel Advocate*. Second, Robinson does a great job at highlighting all of Keeble's influences leading up to his ministry and those who helped him during his ministry. Further, Robinson is very thorough in his examination of the paradox that formed as a result of planting black Churches of Christ, and provides evidence from each state in the South where Keeble ministered. Anyone in a leadership position in the church, especially the Churches of Christ, would do well to read this book to understand one of the great influences in the twentieth century Churches of Christ. They will learn from Keeble's example as well as from the way Keeble's contemporaries worked alongside him.