

FAITHFUL DEFIANCE: MARSHALL KEEBLE'S LIFE AND LEGACY. Edited by C. Leonard Allen. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2025.

REVIEWED BY WES CRAWFORD¹

Edited by C. Leonard Allen, the consequential volume *Faithful Defiance: Marshall Keeble's Life and Legacy* originated from the Carroll B. Ellis Symposium held at Lipscomb University in September 2023. This collection features essays from a blend of scholars and practitioners, including David Holmes, Edward J. Robinson, John Mark Hicks, Tanya Smith Brice, Jefferson R. Caruthers Jr., and Orpheus J. Heyward. These contributors build upon the foundational work of previous historians, such as Arthur Smith Jr., Forrest Neil Rhoads, and J. E. Choate, who sought to capture the essence of the most prominent African American evangelist in the history of the Churches of Christ. Distinguishing itself from earlier attempts, this volume deliberately shifts away from hagiography to provide a rigorous and honest exploration of Keeble's life. As Allen notes, the goal is not merely to praise the evangelist, but to "better understand and appreciate the amazing fruit of his life." While readers might desire a deeper critical analysis regarding Keeble's response to the American civil rights movement, the authors largely succeed in achieving their stated objective.

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The compilation effectively gathers voices uniquely qualified to articulate Keeble's life and enduring impact. As the dean of Lipscomb University's College of Bible and Ministry, Allen is part of a select group of historians who have extensively documented the Churches of Christ in recent decades. His previous works, such as *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* and *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal*, demonstrate his commitment to making the movement's vibrant history accessible to both church leadership and the laity. For this project, Allen curated an impressive roster of contributors to render a highly accurate portrait of the iconic evangelist.

Among the essayists, Robinson serves as the unquestioned expert on African American Churches of Christ. Similarly, Caruthers and Heyward offer invaluable perspectives, drawing from their decades of leadership within African American congregations to uniquely speak to Keeble's legacy. Brice, recognized for her recent contributions to race studies within the denomination, delivers a sharp and accurate critique of the White leaders who utilized Keeble to uphold a racist status quo.

Structurally, the book is divided into three distinct sections: the first establishes Keeble's historical context, the second examines his life and ministry, and the third evaluates his long-term legacy. Collectively, these chapters chronicle the journey of a highly successful Black evangelist who achieved prominence within a predominantly White, southern Christian denomination during the first half of the twentieth century.

The contributors effectively illuminate Keeble's awkward position within his faith family. While he wielded significant influence among Black members, his vociferous praise from White congregants was often contingent upon him remaining "in his place." Aligning with the Booker T. Washington tradition of Black American leadership, Keeble never publicly criticized White paternalism or racism. Instead, he adeptly navigated the existing system to fund his extensive evangelistic campaigns and to support the Nashville Christian Institute, where he served as president for sixteen years from 1942 to 1958. Furthermore, the volume includes valuable appendices, most notably "Keeble in His Own Words," which offers his personal reflections on race, sound doctrine, his mentors, and the closure of the Nashville Christian Institute. Allen deserves commendation for selecting poignant excerpts from Keeble's sermons and writings that enrich the reader's understanding of the man himself.

Ultimately, *Faithful Defiance* warrants substantial praise. The text constructs a more accurate and vivid portrayal of Keeble than any prior publication. For instance, in

evaluating Keeble's reluctance to publicly confront White racism, Brice astutely observes that White church leaders viewed his work "as a tool to maintain racial segregation among congregations and, likely most important, as instruments of social control and social alienation." The authors compellingly argue that Keeble fully grasped this White-controlled system, strategically utilizing it to advance both his ministry and his school.

Future biographers should build upon the foundation laid by Allen and his coauthors by conducting further analysis of Keeble's Christian sectarianism and racial attitudes, as both elements deeply shaped his legacy across White and Black Churches of Christ. This volume would function beautifully as a guide for ecclesiastical study or as supplemental reading for an undergraduate course in Restoration History. In either setting, readers will walk away with a broad perspective on one of the twentieth century's greatest preaching giants.