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Marshall Keeble And The Implementation Of A Grand Strategy:
Erasing The Color Line In The Church Of Christ

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
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by
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ABSTRACT

Marshall Keeble
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Erasing The Color Line In The Church Of Christ

by

Darrell Broking

This study examines the development of Marshall Keeble's work during the early and middle parts of the twentieth century in the Church of Christ. The purpose of this study is to examine the direction taken by Keeble in his work and determine whether he was a submissive Tom used by whites to accomplish their goals among blacks, or to determine if he was pursuing his own grand strategy to defuse racial tension in the Church of Christ. Conclusions of this research denote that Marshall Keeble was following a grand strategy, or a decisive course of action designed to erase the color line in the Church of Christ without the negative effects of creating further division in the church. The final analysis demonstrates that the strategy of Marshall Keeble was effective, whereas the strategy of Keeble's contemporaries was impotent.

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CHAPTER 1

WHY THE KEEBLE STORY NEEDS TO BE TOLD AGAIN

One of the dark clouds overshadowing American history is seen in the post-reconstruction era. By the 1890s Southern whites exercised enough political power to develop codes of segregation at the state level, the Jim Crow laws. In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities were constitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment.¹ Under the Jim Crow laws, blacks asserting themselves as equals were treated inhumanely. One hundred sixty-one blacks were lynched in 1892, mainly for asserting themselves as equals.² Lynchings were so common that they were advertised in newspapers, “providing a sort of spectator sport.”³ George Fredrickson’s research suggests that the Jim Crow laws were “analogous to Nazi treatment of the Jews . . .,” and “contrary to the national interest.”⁴ In many aspects Fredrickson is correct. One result of the *Plessy* decision was slavery under a new name. The Supreme Court’s decision allowed white supremacy to achieve its fullest institutional development between 1890 and 1950.⁵

¹Thomas, A. Bailey, David M. Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 522.

²Ibid.

³Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About History*, (New York: Avon Books, 1995), 216.

⁴George M. Fredrickson, *Racism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 129.

⁵Ibid., 99.

There was nothing equal in the “separate but equal” philosophy of Southern elites. Separate but equal doctrine was the fruition of a mentality that alleged whites were supreme, and blacks were defective, base, and wretched. Separate but equal doctrine is the lowest ebb of a people claiming that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. In the area of education, separate but equal meant that blacks were segregated into inferior schools. White schools usually received ten times more funding than black schools, which translated into better textbooks, instruction, and facilities. Some states even failed to provide high schools for blacks.⁶ This was the culture into which Marshall Keeble was born and spent his life trying to change.

During this dark period of American history, most Southern whites in the Church of Christ were in agreement with the separate but equal policy of the day. Many of the old restoration preachers believed that blacks were inferior to whites. J. C. McCaleb, who is known for his mission work in Japan, once said:

There is a vast difference between them and us, as great as white is from black, and no sort of device can conceal this. The black skin, the flattened nose and kinky hair are hated by the blacks themselves, and every one of them would change to white people if they could. I do not blame them for this, but let us remember that this difference in race is the work of God and not of man.⁷

White interest, even among Christians, in black schools was often aimed at making an allegedly inferior people less of a threat to a white society.

The story of Marshall Keeble, a black preacher during this racially charged period, is a story that needs to be reexamined and retold in light of changes that have taken place

⁶Davis, *History*, 215.

⁷Earl Irvin West, *The Search For The Ancient Order*, vol. 3, (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1979), 181-182; J. M. McCaleb, “Japan Letter,” *Christian Leader & The Way*, 21 (1907), 3.

because of the civil rights movement. Earlier works about Keeble seem to gloss over the racial tensions of Keeble's day. J. E. Choate claimed that Keeble "accepted the prejudices held against the Negro race."⁸ When earlier writers wrote about Keeble's work they mentioned racism cautiously, presenting their comments in guarded and non-inflammatory language. The fact of the matter is that Keeble knew human nature and he knew that racial change would not come overnight. Through persistence, patience, and with the help of "Keeble's Boys", Keeble softened many hearts hardened through racially influenced rearing. Writers, who carefully looked over their shoulders, not wanting to offend anyone by alluding to the real ugliness that Keeble had to endure, have written Keeble's story without giving him credit for working to end racism in the Church of Christ. Their writings seem to indicate that racism was an accepted norm of society, a norm embraced by Keeble himself. The facts surrounding Keeble's life do not suggest that Keeble just accepted racism.

A greater error than the racist attitudes that existed in the church would be to ignore that those attitudes existed, and to fail to recognize the greatness of a man like Marshall Keeble and his life's work. There were other black preachers and leaders in the church who made great contributions toward eradicating racism in the church, but none of them were able to accomplish what Marshall Keeble accomplished. As this thesis progresses, the reasons for Keeble's unprecedented success will be examined.

Marshall Keeble was one of the great preachers in the Church of Christ between the 1930s and the 1960s. Keeble's profound preaching style allowed him to diagnose his audience, regardless of ethnicity, in direct, straightforward terms, without quenching the

⁸J. E. Choate, *A Biography of Marshall Keeble, Roll Jordan Roll*, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1974), 107.

audience's craving for more of his preaching. Keeble knew that some people in his audiences became angry while hearing him preach as directly as he did, but Keeble said that he would rather have people roll and tumble in bed at night than to roll and tumble in hell.⁹ Keeble's altruism motivated him to endure hardships and obstacles, which would have discouraged many others. Marshall Keeble did not have to suffer like Paul (2 Cor. 11:23-28), but he suffered for his cause more than most men could endure. Keeble kept on suffering year after year because he had one goal in mind; he was committed to following the New Testament. No man, white or black, was going to hinder Keeble from fulfilling his goal. People who view Marshall Keeble as an Uncle Tom just do not understand the man and the environment in which he lived and worked.

The amazing thing about Keeble's story is not that he was such a great preacher or that he endured so many hardships to do the work of an evangelist. The amazing thing about Keeble's story is that Marshall Keeble was a black preacher with a seventh grade education who did not allow racial lines to interfere with his work. Keeble was on the cutting edge of erasing the color line in the Church of Christ, and at the same time Keeble baptized more people into the church than any other preacher of his day.¹⁰ No one in the Church of Christ since Keeble's day has accomplished what Keeble accomplished.

Information about Marshall Keeble is scarce. Details of Keeble's early years are preserved mainly through the biographic work of Keeble's friend and contemporary, B.

⁹Marshall Keeble, "The One Physician," <<http://www.tctc.com/~orchardh/links2.htm>> n.d. [accessed 21 November 2000].

¹⁰J. E. Choate, *A Biography of Marshall Keeble, Roll Jordan Roll*, (Nashville, The Gospel Advocate Co., 1974), xiii.

C. Goodpasture, and through the work of the Nashville historian, J. E. Choate, *A Biography of Marshall Keeble, Roll Jordan Roll*. In addition, in 1970 Forrest Rhoads completed his Ph. D. dissertation at Southern Illinois University on Marshall Keeble, “A Study of Marshall Keeble’s Effectiveness as a Preacher.” A great deal of Rhoads’ research was in the form of personal interviews with Marshall Keeble. In 1977 Paul Phillips published an article titled, “The Interracial Impact of Marshall Keeble Black Evangelist,” in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. Marshall Keeble also wrote a small book, *From Mule Back to Super Jet with the Gospel*, which details his overseas journeys. Furthermore, Marshall Keeble was a frequent contributor to a few monthly journals, mainly *The Gospel Advocate*. Through Keeble’s frequent writings to the journals, details about his life, work, achievements, and the hardships he faced were recorded into history. Many of Keeble’s sermons were also recorded on reel-to-reel tape, a few of which have been digitally reproduced on compact disk and cassette tape. These too provide a wealth of information about the late Marshall Keeble.

Biographic works on Marshall Keeble seldom attempted to analyze the work of Keeble in the area of racial equality. When the area of racial equality in the Church of Christ is examined, no attempt is made to explain why Keeble was so successful at thawing out those frigid racial tensions. In this thesis that information will be analyzed with a view toward understanding why Keeble was as successful as he was at tearing down racial lines in the Church of Christ. Both blacks and whites who sought to interpret Keeble’s work in light of their own ethos often misunderstood Keeble’s endeavors. At the same time Keeble was loved and respected by many, regardless of ethnicity.

CHAPTER 2

A GOSPEL PREACHER IN THE MAKING

A man's life is never molded in a vacuum. In order to understand any historical figure, it is necessary to understand the context during which his character was formed. Keeble's story needs to begin before his birth, during the nineteenth century. Major Horace Pinkney Keeble, a prominent lawyer in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, purchased a slave named Marshall,¹¹ who then wore Keeble's surname.¹² During the 1830s the Church of Christ became a viable part of Rutherford County, Tennessee.¹³ In an 1831 issue of the *Christian Messenger*, Tolbert Fanning mentioned that the Church of Christ was growing in the Murfreesboro area. Fanning also mentioned several leading men of the area who were members of the church; among those named is a Keeble.¹⁴ It is unclear whether this Keeble was part of the Keeble clan into which Marshall Keeble's grandfather was sold as a slave. However, Major Keeble's family was one of the few Keeble families in Rutherford County recorded on the United States census during this period.¹⁵ Regardless, it is clear that Murfreesboro was an environment where the Church

¹¹Marshall Keeble's grandfather was named Marshall. Keeble also had an uncle who bore the same name. From this point when Marshall Keeble is mentioned, the subject of this paper is being considered.

¹²Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 14.

¹³Charles B. Arnette, *History of the East Main Church of Christ*, (n. p., 1998), 113.

¹⁴Tolbert Fanning, "A Letter to the *Christian Messenger*," quoted in *History of the East Main Church of Christ*, 83.

¹⁵This information was obtained by searching the US Census from Rutherford County, Tennessee, between 1820 and 1910, (www.Ancestry.com).

of Christ was successfully promoting its message. Marshall Keeble's grandfather and his uncle, also named Marshall Keeble, were both preachers in the Church of Christ.¹⁶ Later Keeble's father served as an assistant preacher to Preston Taylor, who was also the first black licensed undertaker in Tennessee.¹⁷ Taylor baptized Marshall Keeble into the Church when Marshall was fourteen years of age.¹⁸

Although Marshall Keeble's mother was not a member of the Church during the early years of his life, Keeble would later enjoy baptizing her. Marshall said that he often called his mother's attention to her religious mistakes, much to her anger.¹⁹ Finally, while Keeble was away from home holding one of his tent meetings, his mother paid Minnie Keeble, Marshall's wife, a visit. Mrs. Keeble told Minnie, "You tell Marsh to hurry home; I want to hear him preach once more."²⁰ Upon receiving this news, Marshall cut his meeting short and returned home. The next Sunday Mrs. Keeble came forward after Marshall's sermon. Keeble said, "I couldn't wait for her to come to me, I ran and grasped her in my arms." After a few moments of weeping, Marshall took his mother and finally after years of heartache, he baptized her.

¹⁶Paul D. Phillips, "The Interracial Impact of Marshall Keeble Black Evangelist, 1878-1968," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 36 (1977), 65.

¹⁷Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 16.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹Marshall Keeble, "Nothing too Hard for the Lord," *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist*, B. C. Goodpasture ed., (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1931 repr. 1966), 68.

²⁰*Ibid.*

During the Civil War, Marshall Keeble's grandfather served as Major Keeble's valet. During this time frame, Keeble's grandfather and father were both taught to read and write by the Keebles.²¹ There was obviously some affinity between Major Keeble and Marshall Keeble's grandfather, which would help shape young Marshall's views toward interracial relationships. After the Civil War, Marshall Keeble's grandfather and his uncle, Marshall Keeble, purchased a farm in the area. It was on that farm, just two and a half miles from Murfreesboro, on December 7, 1878, that Marshall Keeble was born to Robert and Mittie Keeble.²² Four years later Robert Keeble moved to Nashville where he took employment with the city.²³

While being reared in Nashville, Marshall Keeble was allowed to attend school through the seventh grade.²⁴ When Robert Keeble finally purchased his own home, Marshall was expected to leave school to get a job and help pay the mortgage.²⁵ Keeble never complained about ending his formal education after the seventh grade. When discussing his education Keeble would say, "I did not have the privilege of sitting at the feet of men in great institutions, but I had the privilege of rubbing up against them."²⁶ Keeble obviously rubbed up against many good men. His recorded speeches reveal a

²¹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 16.

²²Social Security Death Index, <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 21 March 2002].

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴B. C. Goodpasture, ed., *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist*, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1931 repr. 1966), 9.

²⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 17.

²⁶Marshall Keeble, A Lecture Delivered at Freed-Hardeman College, *Sermons to Remember*, [CD-ROM] (Henderson, TN.: Freed-Hardeman University, 1962).

tremendous wealth of knowledge. Later in life, Marshall Keeble became President of The Nashville Christian Institute, and after retirement he was retained as the school's President Emeritus.²⁷

A family that overcame the tragedy of slavery, through diligence and hard work, reared Marshall Keeble. The ethic to learn as much as possible, to work hard without complaint, and to serve the God of the Bible made Marshall Keeble into the kind of man who would endure criticism and adversity from both whites and blacks as he sought to make a better world for both races. Keeble idolized Booker T. Washington and never missed an opportunity to hear Washington speak. Keeble said that Washington taught him things that he could not learn from the Bible.²⁸ Both of the biographies of Marshall Keeble focus the context of Keeble's rise to greatness as beginning with his marriage to Minnie Womack.²⁹ A black preacher named Alexander Campbell is also given much credit for helping young Marshall get his evangelistic career going. However, without the nineteenth century influence of the Church of Christ in Murfreesboro, and the ethics of Marshall Keeble's parents and grandparents, it is questionable that Keeble would have married into the Womack family. Furthermore, it is of interest to mention that Keeble's uncle converted Alexander Campbell.³⁰ All of these factors, combined with Keeble's

²⁷Choate, Roll *Jordan Roll*, 114-127.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 18. Goodpasture ed., *Biography and Sermons*, 10.

³⁰Earl West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, vol. 4, (Germantown, TN.: Religious Book Service, 1987), 239.

respect for Booker T. Washington, were the proper mix needed to make Keeble the great thawer of racial fridity in the twentieth century Church of Christ.

After leaving school to help his father pay his mortgage, Marshall took a job in a bucket factory. Keeble worked sixty hours a week at the stipulated wage of forty-cents an hour.³¹ At the age of eighteen, Keeble took his next job in a soap factory. The next year Keeble married his neighbor, Minnie Womack.³² One of the interesting aspects of this relationship is that Minnie's father, S. W. Womack, was baptized into the Church in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, in 1866.³³ Womack worshipped in a congregation where blacks and whites worshipped and worked together, during a time when integrated congregations were far from the norm.³⁴ Womack was also an important figure in Keeble's life, and certainly helped shape Keeble into a gospel preacher.

After Marshall and Minnie married, Marshall went into business for himself. He opened a small grocery store in Nashville.³⁵ Minnie usually ran the store alone, while Marshall worked the streets as a huckster. Keeble raised his own horse and he owned a fine cart from which he sold fruits and vegetables during the summer and coal during the winter. During his huckster days, Keeble said that the Nashville city council passed an

³¹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 17.

³²J. E. Choate dated the marriage during Keeble's eighteenth year. *Ibid.*, 18. B. C. Goodpasture dated the marriage during Keeble's nineteenth year. Since Goodpasture was Keeble's close friend, his record is probably the most accurate. Goodpasture ed., *Biography and Sermons*, 9.

³³West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 3, 180.

³⁴S. W. Womack, "Attitude of the Races," *The Gospel Advocate*, 57 (1915), 7.

³⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 19.

ordinance against yelling on the streets to keep the hucksters from taking business from the local merchants. Keeble said it was hard for him to break the habit of calling out to people about his goods and prices. On one occasion a policeman was going to arrest Keeble for yelling, but he looked at Keeble's horse and cart and assumed that they belonged to a white man because they were too fine for a black man to own. The officer asked Keeble who owned the horse and cart, to which Keeble answered, "it's Mr. Keebles!" The officer then told Keeble, "You tell him to stop you from hollering out here on the street." "Yes, sir, I'll tell him" was Keeble's reply.³⁶ Keeble's ability to think quickly under pressure saved him from paying a fine that day, and it proved to help Keeble advance his cause in the years to come.

With Minnie running the family store, Marshall was able to begin his career as a traveling evangelist. Choate says that it is not exactly clear when Marshall Keeble began to preach.³⁷ Goodpasture dates the beginning of Keeble's preaching at about 1902.³⁸ Keeble said that he was 18 when he preached his first sermon, which was preached at the Jackson Street Church of Christ in Nashville. Thus, Keeble's preaching career actually began in 1896.³⁹ Minnie, as a graduate of Fisk University, was a tremendous aid to Marshall as he worked toward becoming a unique orator. Minnie corrected her

³⁶Marshall Keeble, interview by J. E. Choate, 1965, Nashville, tape recording, Marshall Keeble collection, Beaman Library, David Lipscomb University, Nashville, tape 1 side 1.

³⁷Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 21.

³⁸Goodpasture wrote his biographic sketch of Keeble in 1931. At that point Keeble had been preaching the gospel for twenty-nine years. Goodpasture ed., *Biography and Sermons*, 10.

³⁹George Baker, "Brother Keeble and the Lord," *The Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, 29 March 1964, 6-7, 15.

husband's grammar and enunciation so often that he tired of it. Keeble said that Minnie was trying to make a "Fiskite" out of him.⁴⁰ Later in life Marshall Keeble cherished the gift of speech given to him by Minnie. One year during the Freed-Hardeman Lectureship Keeble was invited to dinner at the home of a Native American student named James White. During the course of the meal James told Keeble that the students were to check each speaker's grammar and enunciation, and that Keeble received the highest marks of all of the lectureship speakers.

The early years of Keeble's preaching career placed an extreme hardship on Marshall and Minnie, both financially and physically. There were occasions when Keeble was threatened with tar and feathers for preaching the gospel. The Keebles tried to keep their hardships to themselves.⁴¹ Once while reflecting on the hardships of those early years, Keeble said that when he saw Jesus, "I will tell him just how much I suffered to preach his gospel."⁴² Keeble took an old set of luggage given to him by S. W. Womack, which had to be fastened with bailing wire, and set out by train to preach the gospel of Christ.⁴³ Marshall Keeble began his evangelistic work by entering a community and finding a busy street corner, where he would preach to any interested in listening. Keeble said that his favorite day of the week to preach was on Saturday.

⁴⁰Keeble, Interview, tape 1 side 1.

⁴¹Goodpasture ed., *Biography and Sermons*, 10.

⁴²Marshall Keeble, *The Great Physician*, <http://audio.oldpaths.net/Archive/Keeble/Marshall/mkeeble_the_great_physician.ram> n. d. [accessed 12 April 2002].

⁴³Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 33.

Usually blacks in number came into town to take care of their business on Saturdays.⁴⁴

For support during his early evangelistic campaigns, Keeble remembers receiving pigs, hams, rabbits, and molasses. Keeble said that if he received \$2.00 for a meeting it was a big collection.⁴⁵ Financial hardships continued for the Keebles until Marshall became better known in the 1920s. Keeble eventually became so well known by railroad baggage masters that he was often allowed to travel for free.⁴⁶ It is interesting to note the effectiveness with which Keeble was able to weave illustrations from his days of riding the rail service into his sermons.⁴⁷ Even though Keeble's mother-in-law told S. W. Womack that Marshall was not preacher material, young Keeble was well on his way to becoming one of the great orators in the Church of Christ.⁴⁸

By 1915 Marshall committed most of his time to his evangelistic campaigns.

Between 1915 and 1920 Marshall Keeble mainly worked among the African Americans.

In 1919 he reported the following results:

Four years ago I decided to give my entire life to preach the gospel of Christ to my people, and the Lord has blessed my efforts. During these years I have preached 1, 161 sermons, baptized 453, restored to fellowship 86, and planted two congregations and traveled 23,052 miles. I have accomplished this without the aid of any human organization. It is my aim as I enter this year to do more for Jesus and the establishment of His kingdom in the hearts of men. I want to thank all who have fellowshipped me in this work, and ask their continued fellowship and

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 35.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Keeble, *The Great Physician*.

⁴⁸Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 34.

prayers.⁴⁹

Marshall Keeble was not always a welcome face in every place where he pitched his tent. In October of 1919, Keeble began a tent meeting in Collierville, Tennessee. As the meeting began, attendance was high, as was usually the case when Keeble was doing the preaching. Because his interest lay in preaching only what he could find in the New Testament, and because denominational names are not recorded in the New Testament, Keeble often spoke against denominationalism. Keeble would tell his audiences that if he could not find the name of his church in the Bible, that he would immediately get out of it.⁵⁰ This kind of preaching was new to the Collierville crowd. The blacks in attendance apparently reported to whites in the community that Keeble was instigating a race riot. A delegation was sent to check on Keeble. After hearing Keeble preach, the delegation reported, “The preaching was good and just what they needed.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, letters were left on a table in his tent threatening Keeble with bodily harm, or to burn his tent, if he did not leave the area immediately.⁵² However, Marshall Keeble was a man who never backed down to anyone except his Lord. Because the town’s people could not make Keeble leave, they pressured the owner of the lot upon which Keeble pitched his tent and forced him to run Keeble off of his property.

⁴⁹Marshall Keeble, “News and Notes,” *Word and Work*, 13 (1919), 39.

⁵⁰ Marshall Keeble, “One in Christ,” <http://audio.oldpaths.net/Archive/Keeble/Marshall/mkeeble_one_in_christ.ram> n. d. [accessed 10 April 2002].

⁵¹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 43.

⁵²Ibid.

During these early formative years of Keeble's life, Southern congregations of the Church of Christ embraced Southern bigotry. Admittedly, segregation and bigotry were stronger in the South than in other geographic areas of the United States. The late J. D. Tant, a Texas preacher (1861-1941), after traveling to Kansas in 1898 wrote, "Negroes ride in the same coach, go to the same school, eat at the same table with white people, and sometimes sleep in the beds of their white neighbors; all of which, I am glad to say, is not tolerated in 'heathen Texas.'"⁵³ Between the years of 1900-1918 the United States witnessed tremendous debasement and degradation of blacks. Between 1899 and 1909, on average 92.5 blacks were lynched annually in the South.⁵⁴ Marshall Keeble was not the kind of man to be hindered by these seemingly insurmountable odds. By 1920 Marshall Keeble's life was improving. The time was near that Keeble's work would begin chipping away the icy racial tensions in the Church of Christ, a work that would bear fruit in the 1950s and 1960s, and make Keeble both loved and hated by many.

As more white members of the Church of Christ came to an awareness of Keeble's ability and work, Keeble's financial status improved. The founder of the Life and Casualty Insurance Company and member of the church of Christ, A. M. Burton, took great interest in Keeble's work. Keeble and Burton had worked together as early as 1915 in an attempt to build interest in a struggling school for blacks called Silver Point. Because of financial problems and the inability to attract a student body, Silver Point

⁵³J. D. Tant, "In Kansas," *Gospel Advocate*, 40 (1889), 71; West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 3, 12.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

closed its doors a few years later.⁵⁵ As Burton took greater interest in Keeble's work, he often paid Keeble's traveling expenses, purchased Keeble's tents, and paid other expenses associated with Keeble's work.⁵⁶

Silver Point's set back did not discourage Burton or Keeble about the possibility of opening another school for blacks. Especially of interest was a school that would serve as a training facility for black preachers. Property for another black school was purchased in 1919. Classroom instruction began in 1920 under the charter of the Southern Practical Institute. Burton's vision for the Southern Practical Institute was "to train colored boys and girls to be self-respecting and self-supporting by becoming true Christians."⁵⁷ The Southern Practical Institute failed miserably. The school's superintendent required black students to enter through the back door, even though the Southern Practical Institute was a school for blacks.⁵⁸ The forty students who arrived on the first day of class did not tolerate the superior Southern white attitude present at the school. The Southern Practical Institute failed to prove itself to be practical and closed its doors within six weeks. Plans were to reopen the school in 1923, but it was actually October 9, 1939, before the school would open again, under the name of The Nashville Christian Institute.

Burton's aforementioned vision for the Southern Practical Institute, and the behavior of the school's superintendent, were mere symptoms of the times. Superior

⁵⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 28-29.

⁵⁶ Marshall Keeble, "Sowing and Reaping," *Gospel Advocate*, 66 (1924), 23.

⁵⁷West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 4, 253.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

attitudes among whites in the southern society and in the Church of Christ were common. The overall goal of the white element of the church was two-fold. No one who examines the historical record of the day can honestly deny that whites desired to see blacks find salvation in the church. However, there was also a desire, based on the popular biased and preconceived notions of the day, to control the behavior of the black community.

During these early days of the twentieth century segregated congregations did not embrace the vision of integration and racial equality. Keeble alluded to the fact that at times whites would say to him that they hoped all of the Negroes in their section would obey the gospel, “because when one accepts the gospel it seems to make a different man out of him in every respect.”⁵⁹ Those were days in which many whites in the Church of Christ held membership in the Ku Klux Klan.⁶⁰ Even J. W. Brents, with whom Keeble would later work at the Nashville Christian Institute, said that the greatest thing about Keeble was that “He knows his place and at all times scrupulously keeps it.”⁶¹ Ira Rice, Jr. (1917-2001), in his autobiography, mentioned that his mother’s father denied that blacks had souls. Rice’s mother differed with her father inasmuch as Mrs. Rice said that blacks do have souls, but that they are not the white’s “social equals.”⁶² In 1929, while Ira Rice, Sr., was conducting singing schools for the congregations in Houston, he met

⁵⁹Marshall Keeble, “Sowing and Reaping,” *Gospel Advocate*, 63 (1921) 78; Phillips, “Interracial Impact,” 67.

⁶⁰Ibid. 68.

⁶¹J. W. Brents, “Sowing and Reaping,” *Gospel Advocate*, 73 (1931), 1289.

⁶²Ira Y. Rice, Jr., *Pressing Toward The Mark*, vol. 1, (Dallas: G. T. Press, 1998), 509.

Marshall Keeble for the first time. When he returned to his home, Mr. Rice told his family that he met a black preacher who “knew his place.”⁶³ Some clearly viewed Marshall Keeble as an “Uncle Tom;” however, those who did failed to understand the methods of Keeble.⁶⁴

Marshall Keeble, during these early years of his work, mainly focused his evangelistic efforts toward blacks, but he was genuinely interested in preaching to all people regardless of ethnicity. From Booker T. Washington, Keeble learned how to bring whites into his work, while maintaining pride in his own ethnicity. Keeble’s ability to work, not as an Uncle Tom, but as a man who knew how to tell people what they needed to hear without harshness and anger, allowed him to flourish during these critical days in the South.

In February 1926, Keeble began an evangelistic meeting in Summit, Georgia, which stirred up the local Ku Klux Klan. Whites were interested in Keeble’s preaching and many of them attended the meeting. One night about twenty-five Klansmen burst into the meeting and said that no whites were to attend Keeble’s meeting.⁶⁵ One of the Klansmen handed Keeble a note and demanded that Keeble read it aloud, which he immediately did: “The Ku Klux Klan stands for white supremacy. Be governed

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Some church historians view Marshall Keeble as an “Uncle Tom,” but as noted by Choate, their research is a “blindsiding of the facts.” J. E. Choate, “Hughes Says Church Is a Denomination,” <http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/articles/agents/112_12_08.htm> 1997 [accessed 18 November 2001].

⁶⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 53-54.

accordingly.”⁶⁶ To ease tensions Keeble said, “I have always known the white man is superior. They brought us out of Africa, and have lifted us up.”⁶⁷ In his interview with Paul Rhoads, Keeble said that he was doing what the Bible taught by agreeing with his adversary quickly.⁶⁸

While the Summit, Georgia incident is interpreted by some as proof of Keeble’s “Uncle Tom” behavior, such an interpretation is only possible when taken out of the overall context of Keeble’s life and work. Instead of changing the Ku Klux Klan by reciprocating their bigoted attitude, Keeble sought to change them through the gospel of Christ. This is exactly what began to happen. Soon whites in the church, who were also members of the Ku Klux Klan, became staunch defenders of Keeble. In fact, on Keeble’s next visit to Summit, the Klansman who made Keeble read his note publicly met Keeble in the community and told him that if anyone in town bothered him, to let him know.⁶⁹ Additionally, during another meeting in Georgia, four Klansmen came into the meeting dressed in their robes and sat on the front row. After the meeting, one of the four came forward, gave Keeble his hand and was baptized. Keeble remembered that he “was not excited; at least he did not know I was. The least little sign of emotion and we would have had trouble. Yes sir, they wanted to fight as they was, but they didn’t have no business meddling with me.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶Phillips, “Interracial Impact,” 68.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 55.

⁷⁰Keeble, Interview, tape 6, side 1.

1927 proved to be a notable year in Keeble's work. Beginning on April 17, 1927, Keeble began a five-week tent meeting in Tampa, Florida. During this meeting Keeble baptized ninety-nine people, four of whom were denominational preachers.⁷¹ During the entire year of 1926 Keeble only baptized 163 people. The success in Tampa sent Keeble off on a circuit through Florida. As reports of his Florida work were noticed, Keeble's preaching became more and more in demand.

In August of 1927, Keeble held a meeting in Jackson, Tennessee. A professor from Lane University attended the meeting one evening and alleged that Keeble was preaching error. Keeble recalled the event thusly:

I was holding a meeting once at a place and there was a colored man that happened to have finished college, had some advantage of me intellectually, and he knew that he had it because you could tell from our discussion in the language that I was using that I was short, and the verbs that I was splitting and the adjectives that I was bursting. He could tell that I was unprepared intellectually to stand before him and he attempted to take advantage of me. And here's what he said. When I quoted Acts 2:38, he got up right in the audience and asked me, "What is the Greek on that?" He knew that I knew nothing about Greek. What's the Greek on that? I stood there puzzled, didn't know what to say about it, and didn't want the cause of Christ to suffer, but he had me. This thought came to me, and I was proud of it. I said everybody in this audience that knows Greek, lift their hands. I looked around and I saw nobody's hand up. I turned around to this great preacher and I said, "What's the need of discussing Greek? Nobody out there knows it," and I got away with him and felt sorry for him.⁷²

Fifty-eight people were baptized during the Jackson meeting.⁷³ Marshall Keeble proved himself to be an able and talented debater, and one with a heart.

⁷¹Ibid., 56.

⁷²Marshall Keeble, "The Church Among the Colored," *Abilene Christian College Lectures*, (Austin: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1950), 147.

⁷³Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 56.

By the 1930s Marshall Keeble was already an accomplished preacher. Greater things were on the horizon for this man who was born and reared in the depraved racial conditions of the South. Marshall Keeble never accepted the racial conditions that existed in twentieth-century America, and especially the conditions that existed in the church of Christ during these early years of his work. What was perceived by some as Keeble's ability to keep his place was actually Keeble's way of slowly working to change people's behavior or his chipping away at the iceberg of racism.

CHAPTER 3

CHIPPING AWAY THE RACIAL ICEBERG

Keeble's style of debate was unique for a preacher in the Church of Christ. Debates were often set up in advance to allow the debaters an opportunity to prepare for their polemic. Keeble's idea of debating was to take challenges from right off of the floor and invite an opponent to debate at that moment. Keeble said:

I took them on where they was red hot, and I took them on right when I was having a meeting. And that is the reason I baptized so many people. When you set up a debate after your meeting and they have done cooled off so you lost your fight. You ought to got it while they want to debate.⁷⁴

Part of Keeble's meeting strategy was to bait opponents into debating and not to allow them to cool off, resulting in a loss of interest. In 1930 Keeble held a meeting in Valdosta, Georgia. A sectarian preacher, angered with Keeble because several members of his denomination were baptized during the meeting, challenged Keeble's legitimacy. After being invited to the podium and accepting the invitation to speak, the sectarian preacher said to those baptized during the meeting, "The reason this man baptized you is because you never got religion in the first place." Keeble's quick response silenced this preacher, as it had silenced many others in the past. Keeble said, "He's right. You never got religion," and after quoting James 1:27 he said, "Religion is something you do, not something you get."⁷⁵

Keeble said that he never debated anyone who was too tough for him because all of his opponents were just about the same. "If you ain't got no Bible for your teaching you

⁷⁴Keeble, Interview, tape 1, Side 1.

⁷⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 56.

just about the same,” said Keeble.⁷⁶ Through this process Keeble said, “I stripped many a man’s church. I stripped his church until I felt sorry for him. He looked so pitiful seeing his members coming up and him sitting right there.”⁷⁷ In part, this is the reason that Keeble baptized so many people during his career. Years before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became a leader in the civil rights movement, Marshall Keeble was busy gaining a following of blacks and whites. The more Keeble worked the larger his base of supporters became.

On August 10, 1931, Keeble returned to Valdosta and began the infamous Valdosta, Georgia, revival. Keeble’s friend B. C. Goodpasture sat with him nightly on the pulpit platform. Goodpasture employed a court stenographer to take down Keeble’s sermons in shorthand. He then published his biography of Keeble and the sermons preached during the Valdosta meeting under the title, *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist*.

Interestingly, Goodpasture had the following to say about the Valdosta meeting: “Racial differences were not discussed during the meetings. There was no occasion for it. But the duty of Christian brotherhood has been recognized and practiced to the fullest extent.”⁷⁸ Apparently the ethos of the South did not offer the occasion to discuss racial issues in the church. Christian brotherhood is actually hindered by segregation and racial bias. The Biblical record of Acts 10-11 indicates that Christian brotherhood is only recognized and practiced to the fullest extent when racial barriers are torn down. While

⁷⁶Keeble, Interview, tape 1, side 1.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Goodpasture, *Biography and Sermons*, 15.

the Valdosta meeting did not provide the occasion to discuss racial differences in the church, times were changing and the occasion would soon arrive.

One of the notable differences between Keeble's tent meetings and other tent meetings of the day was that Keeble's meetings were less emotional than others.

Addressing this in the Valdosta meeting Keeble said:

You have been taught to believe that you have got to go through some great excitement and emotionalism to become a child of God. But my friends I am of the opinion and belief that the more of the word of God you get in you, the less emotionalism, and the more of the word of God you get in you, the less excitement. . . . I have been preaching almost 29 years, and in the evangelistic work 18 or 20 years, and I have never objected to a shout in my life. Why don't they shout, Brother Keeble, in your service? It's because they can't. Well, why can't they? Here is my reason. The gospel is like lead, it's heavy, when you preach it to a man, it holds him down. He can't bounce around, but when you preach a false doctrine, it is light, it's like shucks, like cotton, can't help but bounce, nothing to hold it down. But my friends, the bouncing time is over."⁷⁹

The "bouncing time" was over for one hundred sixty-six of those attending the Valdosta meeting. In Valdosta a year earlier to this Keeble baptized fifty-nine people, on one occasion, and before he came out of the water twenty-nine more requested baptism.⁸⁰

During the two Valdosta meetings Keeble baptized a total of three hundred twenty-nine people. Between the meetings Luke Miller baptized one hundred and twenty, whom Miller said that Keeble left "crippled."⁸¹

Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist was soon on its way to becoming one of the most popular books distributed by the Church of Christ during the

⁷⁹Marshall Keeble, "Been to Worship, but Wrong," *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist*, 38.

⁸⁰West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 4, 249.

⁸¹Goodpasture, *Biography and Sermons*, 18.

thirties. The January 14th, 1932 issue of the *Gospel Advocate* contained the following notation about the book: “It is beginning to look like this book will be a record breaker—thirty-five hundred copies sold to date.”⁸² By February another 500 had been copies sold, and by May of that year 5,000 copies were sold. E. Gaston noted that it was indeed unusual for a book to sell as well as Keeble’s.⁸³ Marshall Keeble was now in a position to sway the thinking of many in the church at the grassroots level.

During the 1930s Keeble went to Hopkinsville, Kentucky to hold a meeting. When Keeble arrived at the location where his tent was being erected, there were about twenty white men doing the work. When one curious bystander was told that a black man was going to hold the meeting, he asked the whites why they were putting up his tent. The man then turned to Keeble and said, “Are you going to do the preaching here?” When Keeble affirmed that he was going to do the preaching the man said, “Well, there’s no need of you preaching to your people. Why you’re not a nation. The gospel is not for you all—it’s the nations--you’re not a nation.”⁸⁴ This antagonist was quick to learn that Keeble knew his work well, and he knew how to handle criticism. While reflecting on this event later in his life Keeble noted:

Something is wrong with him, mentally, my friends. He said the gospel is to all nations and you all are not a nation. “Well,” I said, “what are you gonna do about Mark? Mark said go preach the gospel to every creature. So if I happen not to be a nation, I’m creeping around here.” And that man couldn’t answer that question. He walked right on off and never said another word to me and left the ground.⁸⁵

⁸²Foy E. Wallace, “Editorial,” *Gospel Advocate*, 74 (1932), 45.

⁸³ E. Gaston, “Sowing and Reaping,” *Gospel Advocate*, 74 (1932), 596.

⁸⁴Keeble, “Among the Colored,” 148.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

The 1930s were memorable times for Keeble in his evangelistic work. Keeble began receiving invitations to speak on lectureships at Christian colleges for whites. In 1939 The Nashville Institute was finally opened, with Marshall Keeble as its president.⁸⁶ The 1930s also provided much sorrow for Marshall Keeble. Minnie Keeble died in 1932 at the age of fifty-three.⁸⁷ Preceding Minnie in death were three sons, two of whom died in infancy.

Another disappointment for Keeble came from The *Gospel Advocate*. Interestingly, the December 7, 1939, issue of the *Gospel Advocate* contained a twenty-two-page spread on the history of the Church of Christ in Nashville.⁸⁸ The Jackson Street Church of Christ, Keeble's home congregation, was not even mentioned in the article. At the end of the report Boles noted that a few other congregations were not mentioned in the article because they either failed to send their biographical information into the paper or something just happened to it. With all of the information available about Keeble and the Jackson Street congregation, and because of all of the good Keeble did for the Church in Nashville, this oversight was inexcusable. Two weeks later the paper reported that Keeble was going to begin a meeting on the first Sunday in January at the Jackson Street church. The report continued, without apology for omitting the Jackson Street congregation from its earlier report of the Church in Nashville, by mentioning the fact

⁸⁶Phillips, "Interracial Impact," 72.

⁸⁷West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 4, 251.

⁸⁸H. Leo Boles, "General History of the Church in Nashville," *Gospel Advocate*, 81 (1939), 1145-1167.

that “Jackson Street is one of the oldest congregations in the country.”⁸⁹ Keeble’s positive attitude did not allow the paper’s oversight to hinder his continued reporting to the journal.

Keeble’s educational endeavors would provide him with critical ingredients necessary to soften up and begin to change negative racial ideas in the Church of Christ. Much of that would begin bearing fruit during the 1950s and 1960s. With the advent of television, the nation’s attitude toward racism began to change. Keeble’s early years of work, with both whites and blacks, placed him in the exact spot he needed to be during those years.

For example, Keeble was once called upon to visit a white patient in Nashville’s Saint Thomas hospital. The man had read about Keeble and supported his work. When Keeble arrived at the hospital and the patient “spied” Keeble, he grabbed him and hugged him around the neck. Keeble said that he could not hold back his tears. He later reported, “I grabbed him around the neck, patients and nurses looked and held their breath as we hugged.”⁹⁰ Keeble explained that he reciprocated the hug to show what the gospel would do to break down barriers.⁹¹

Marshall Keeble became a regularly featured speaker at many of the Christian college lectureships. For a number of years leading up to his death, Keeble drew the

⁸⁹W. E. Brightwell, “News and Notes,” *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1939), 1243.

⁹⁰Marshall Keeble, “One in Christ.”

⁹¹*Ibid.*

largest crowds at the Freed-Hardeman College Lectureship.⁹² Attempts to tie Keeble to an outline or a manuscript only hindered Keeble's oratorical ability; therefore, Keeble was often allowed to speak "promiscuously."⁹³ While Keeble never abused his freedom to speak off the cuff, he was able to deal with the real issues of life needing attention.

In February 1950 Marshall Keeble was 71 years old and still going strong. After many years of diligent preaching and teaching, the time had arrived to bring the racial issue to a head. In reality, Keeble's years of preaching slowly and steadily permeated and softened attitudes contrary to the gospel. Racism was only one of those attitudes, but one that needed to change nevertheless. Keeble's steady work with white congregations gave him a large following of whites by the 1930s. Furthermore, Keeble's influence through the Nashville Christian Institute and his steady speaking engagements at white Christian colleges, influenced thousands of young minds. By 1950 it was time for Keeble to engage in some of his greatest work.

Keeble was busy as the president of a school and raising money to try to keep the Nashville Christian Institute's doors open. His speech at Abilene Christian College in February of 1950 was a plea for the Christian education of blacks, delivered to a mostly white audience in the auditorium of an institution that was intentionally segregated and opposed to Keeble's plea for racial unity. To this opposition Keeble responded:

Brother Young said that at first he was opposed, he was opposed to this. Why, that's natural. He had his privilege to be so. And many of you may be opposed to it now. That's the reason this meeting is here—to knock the opposition out of you! If we can

⁹²H. A. Dixon, "Marshall Keeble at the College Lectureships," *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 455.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

introduce enough facts or enough things for you to think on, by this time next year you may be with Dr. Young, our opponent no longer.⁹⁴

Marshall Keeble was a master of the parable. Throughout his Abilene speech, in parabolic form, Keeble wove the events recorded in Acts 10-11 into his speech. He pointed out how Peter was unwilling at first to take the gospel to the Gentiles. It is apparent that Keeble was referring to Dr. Young's prior opposition to his work. However, the persistence of Keeble broke down Young's opposition. Then Keeble mentioned that the six Jews who went with Peter to Cornelius' house were also opposed to taking the gospel to the Gentiles, until they actually arrived at Cornelius' house and saw that God did have the Gentiles in his plan. Those six Jews represented the Abilene audience. Keeble was hopeful that he would be able to "knock the opposition" right out of this audience, just as the six Jews who traveled with Peter had their opposition knocked right out of them.

Pointedly, toward the end of Keeble's Abilene speech, he encouraged young preachers in the audience not to get discouraged when people attempt to freeze (discourage) them in their work. Keeble said, "When you see one trying to freeze you, you do like you do with your modern frigidaire—turn on your defroster. That's right. That's right. I've got a defroster on you all this evening; that's the reason you're smiling and encouraging me. You started in here freezing, but I have you defrosted."⁹⁵ Keeble knew that the climate was right to begin thawing biased attitudes and working toward the kind of oneness taught in the New Testament. Through this kind of preaching, Keeble's

⁹⁴Keeble, "Among the Colored," 147.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 156.

influence was deeply embedded into the minds of black and white Christians. By the early 1960s racial segregation was finally being discussed by many in the church.⁹⁶

Without Keeble's influence one wonders how much real progress would have been made toward equality in the Church of Christ. Today racial problems are still prevalent in some areas of the United States, which is still a racist country. However, mainly due to Marshall Keeble, integrated congregations are commonly found in the United States. The day has even arrived when preachers in racially mixed marriages can obtain and maintain work in the Church of Christ. As a point of interest, Marshall Keeble's granddaughter became the first black student to live on the campus of the George Pepperdine College.⁹⁷

Why was Keeble able to defrost his Abilene audience and so many others? Analytically one must first credit the ethos in which Keeble was reared. As was noted previously, Keeble was reared in a home in which the gospel was revered, and where men were judged as equals. Marshall Keeble learned, at an early age, to allow himself to suffer for the greater good of others. To Keeble this was the diamond teaching of the New Testament and the embodiment of Biblical morality. This ethic was woven into Keeble's moral fabric. Some whites obviously attempted to use Keeble to better a race they alleged to be inferior to their own, and some blacks criticized Keeble for allowing himself to be used by whites. Regardless of the motivation of others and the backlash it

⁹⁶A series of letters to the editor of the *Christian Chronicle* dealing with segregation can be viewed at <<http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/race/haymes34.html>>, n. d. [accessed 10 August 2003].

⁹⁷Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, xii.

incurred, Marshall Keeble was firmly committed to preaching to any audience, regardless of its ethnicity.

In the New Testament one reads about the apostle Paul chastening the church at Corinth for taking matters of Biblical teaching before non-Christian authorities.⁹⁸ It was in this context that Paul wrote, “Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?” (I Cor. 6:7).⁹⁹ That Keeble was actually able to live as one willing to suffer, and take the kind of abuse he often did, shows his true strength. It also shows that Keeble read, believed, and followed his Bible.

Examples of Keeble’s willingness to suffer abuse for the cause of Christ abound. One of the best examples of this quality Keeble embraced took place in 1939 at his tent meeting in Ridgely, Tennessee. When Keeble extended the invitation at the end of a sermon, a white man came down the aisle and when Keeble extended his hand to the young man, the white man hit Keeble in the face with a pair of brass knuckles.¹⁰⁰ Keeble was stunned for a few moments but quickly composed himself and continued to extend the invitation for alien sinners to respond to the gospel’s call. The man who struck the blow was drunk and was responding to a dare when he hit Keeble.¹⁰¹ Many of Ridgely’s citizenry, including those of influence, encouraged Keeble to press charges against his

⁹⁸See First Corinthians 6:1.

⁹⁹*The Holy Bible King James Version*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Pub., 1982).

¹⁰⁰Phillips, “The Interracial Impact,” 69.

¹⁰¹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 78.

assailant.¹⁰² However, Keeble refused to have the man prosecuted, thereby winning great favor among the people.

While holding a meeting in Florence, Alabama, a man rushed forward and discharged a firearm. Keeble ignored the man in his “‘Father-forgive-them attitude’ and continued to preach while showing compassion for the weakness of the man.”¹⁰³

Marshall Keeble was the demonstration of strength under control. Like leaven permeating a lump of dough, Keeble’s persistence did much to break down racial walls in the church.

Keeble was also infused with an ethic of honor. It was said of Marshall Keeble’s father, Robert, that he was never seen without being neatly dressed and wearing a stiff white collar, even when plowing a field.¹⁰⁴ This sense of honor for the Keeble name, which was ever present with Marshall Keeble, gave him the keen ability to avoid stooping to the kind of mud slinging and sarcasm that hurt the influence of some of Keeble’s contemporaries.

On one occasion Willy Cato, who worked with Keeble from 1958 to 1968, was in Keeble’s office when a man stopped by to see Keeble. Cato reported that the visitor told Keeble that one of his brethren was saying un-Christian things about him. Keeble simply changed the conversation. The visitor persisted in keeping the conversation on this brother who was slandering Keeble, and strongly advised Keeble to do something about

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Percy E. Ricks, “The Marshall Keeble I knew,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 462.

¹⁰⁴Mrs. Keith N. Slayton, “A Recollection of Robert Keeble,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 454.

it. Keeble replied to his visitor, “Leave him alone, don’t bother him. He is going to be the means of my salvation. I am going to overcome him.”¹⁰⁵ Remaining focused on his work, and remaining out of needless confrontations allowed Keeble’s influence to blossom to its fullest potential.

On another occasion, Keeble and Cato were visiting some of their brethren regarding the work of the Nashville Christian Institute and were treated unkindly. While returning home Keeble said to Cato, “Since it happened I’m glad it did, for it gives me another man to pray for.”¹⁰⁶ Cato remarked that being around Keeble made him want to feel kindly toward anyone who attempted to deal unkindly with him.¹⁰⁷ It is little wonder that Marshall Keeble became such a tremendous Christian role model for both whites and blacks alike.

Keeble’s preaching style also contributed to his tremendous success. While preaching, Keeble was able to use the right amount of humor at the appropriate time. This allowed Keeble to be direct and pointed, and at the same time it helped keep his audiences cool enough to allow Keeble to do his work. Once while preaching in California and challenging the denominational doctrines in the area, a young man in the audience challenged Keeble: “You have spoken about every other church, now what about mine?”¹⁰⁸ Keeble asked the man the name of his church, and when he learned that the man was a Mormon Keeble was puzzled, because he did not know Mormon doctrine.

¹⁰⁵Willie Cato, “Keeble as a Teacher,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 453.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸Phillips, “Interracial Impact,” 69.

Keeble asked the man a second time to repeat the name of his church. When the man said, “The Latter Day Saints” Keeble quickly responded, “You’re too late.”¹⁰⁹ Keeble baptized the man the next night.

On another occasion a preacher from the Primitive Baptist Church said that his church was the oldest church because “it was here before the clouds were flying.”¹¹⁰ To this Keeble responded, “That’s too soon. When Christ came to set up his church clouds were already flying. You are too early.” Keeble had to wait for the crowd to finish laughing before he could continue with his sermon.¹¹¹ It has been said that Keeble “rubbed against the rough edges of a man’s soul with the gospel. The man, woman, girl, or boy who was privileged to hear Brother Keeble went away with a new outlook on life.”¹¹²

These qualities allowed Keeble to experience a tremendous amount of influence with the church. They allowed Keeble to address his Abilene audience as he did, while creating in his audience the desire to treat others better than they had treated them in the past. Keeble always seemed to say just what was needed at the time. After segregation was finally declared illegal, Keeble noted during one of his sermons: “We’ve been

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰J. E. Choate, “Stories and Sayings of Marshall Keeble,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 459.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Albert Gray, “Brother Keeble at His Home Congregation,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 462.

preaching it (integration) all the time, and now we're practicing it."¹¹³ On one occasion Keeble, while preaching to whites said: "God doesn't want you to call a man unclean because he is black. God created him. Don't you call him common or unclean."¹¹⁴ Viewing information like this, while looking at the steadfastness of Keeble's life, dispels the theory suggested by Choate that Keeble accepted the prejudices held against blacks.¹¹⁵ Keeble did not accept racial prejudices; he spent his life changing people's minds about the despicable attitudes of racial bigotry.

¹¹³Marshall Keeble, *Turned Loose*, A Lecture Delivered at Freed-Hardeman College, (Henderson: Freed-Hardeman University, 1962), cassette tape.

¹¹⁴Phillips, "Interracial Impact," 74.

¹¹⁵Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 107.

CHAPTER 4

KEEBLE'S WORK IN EDUCATION

Marshall Keeble realized that part of the solution to the oppression of his people rested in the area of education. Keeble labored toward that end in the field of education as a board member of the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School (commonly called Silver Point) before spending the last years of his life working with the Nashville Christian Institute. A. M. Burton of Nashville, who also established the Southern Practical Institute, helped these schools along. Marshall Keeble knew that his education hindered his work at times. Keeble did not want to see younger preachers go through the same struggles that he had to endure. When Keeble addressed the faculty and student body of Abilene College in 1950, he told the audience about his encounter with a Lane University professor in 1927.¹¹⁶ That day on the polemical platform of debate, the only thing that kept Keeble from defeat was his ability to respond quickly under pressure. Keeble walked away that day a victor in the sense that the gospel he preached did not suffer in his hands. He also walked away that day knowing that something had to be done to provide the young men following in his steps with the kind of education needed to make a difference. Therefore, Keeble worked diligently to see to it that black youths could be afforded a quality education. Keeble's work with the Southern Christian Institute is a silver lining in the dark clouds overshadowing post-reconstruction America.

¹¹⁶Keeble was appealing to his white brethren to help support his work at the Nashville Christian Institute. Keeble, "Among the Colored," 147.

Tennessee enacted a law prohibiting integrated education in 1901.¹¹⁷ Under the separate but equal plan, blacks realized that little would be done to help further black education. In October of 1906, black Christians in Nashville called a meeting to discuss the problem of black education. During the meeting, it was decided that a school for blacks would be started in the Jackson Street Church of Christ building.¹¹⁸ As plans for the school were developing, Marshall Keeble was the treasurer of the Jackson Street Church of Christ, and he was already preaching for the Jackson Street Church occasionally. Little did Keeble know that a seed was being planted, which in years to come would yield tremendous opportunities for black education, with Keeble at the helm.

On January 8, 1907, the Nashville Normal, Industrial, and Orphan School opened at the Jackson Street Church of Christ building, with nine students in attendance.¹¹⁹ By 1908, S. W. Womack, Keeble's father-in-law, was serving as the school's superintendent and enrollment had increased to seventeen students.¹²⁰ In 1909, the student body consisted of twenty-one students.¹²¹ Plans were then made to move the school to a new location near Cookeville, Tennessee. It was thought that the school's expenses would be

¹¹⁷Dennis C. Dickerson, *Salvation and Separatism: William H. Franklin and the Presbyterian Mission in East Tennessee*, (Johnson City: The 35th annual meeting of the Tennessee Conference of Historians, 2002), cassette.

¹¹⁸West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 3, 182.

¹¹⁹G. P. Bowser, "Putnam County Normal, Industrial and Orphan School, Silver Point, Tenn.," *Gospel Advocate* 57 (1915), 744-745. Choate gives the date of October 8, 1907 for the school's opening; however, Bowser's piece in the *Gospel Advocate* is a primary source. Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 24.

¹²⁰G. P. Bowser, "Work Among The Colored People," *Gospel Advocate*, 50 (1908), 125.

¹²¹S. W. Womack, "Work Among the Colored People," *Gospel Advocate*, 51 (1909), 121.

less in a rural setting, and that food could be raised for the students on site.¹²² Ten acres of land were purchased for \$250.00 at Silver Point, Tennessee. A two-story school building was built on the site and the Nashville Normal, Industrial, and Orphan School was moved to Silver Point in October of 1909.¹²³ The school's board of trustees consisted of A. M. Burton, S. P. Pitmann, J. S. Hammond, O. P. Barry, Alexander Campbell, S. W. Womack, P. H. Black, Henry Clay, and young Marshall Keeble.¹²⁴ Through the work at Silver Point, A. M. Burton would come to know of the tremendous abilities possessed by Marshall Keeble.

George P. Bowser and Philista H. Womack, Marshall Keeble's sister-in-law, were Putnam County Normal, Industrial, and Orphan School's first teachers. Womack and Bowser earned about \$50.00 a month for their labor with the Silver Point School.¹²⁵ Bowser was an educated gospel preacher and a great influence on Marshall Keeble. Among members of the church of Christ, Bowser is known as the father of black education. While attending Walden University, Bowser learned Greek, Hebrew, French, German, and Latin.¹²⁶ It is of interest to note that for the first few years after Keeble began to preach, he and G. P. Bowser were neighbors in Nashville, Tennessee.¹²⁷

¹²²Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 24.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid., 28.

¹²⁵Ibid., 25.

¹²⁶West, *Ancient Order*, vol 4, 243.

¹²⁷Ibid.

Keeble often surrounded himself with educated and honorable men.

The sad reality of the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School was that there was little interest in the school by people with the ability to help it prosper. Public funds were mainly sent to support white education in Putnam County. However, the county did support the school for four months out of the school year.¹²⁸ Accordingly, the Silver Point School offered public education from August to December. From January through April, the school focused on its industrial aspect.¹²⁹ Students who lived on campus were charged \$6.00 for board and lodging.¹³⁰

Few whites knew about the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School and those who knew about it were not overly interested in the school's prosperity. A. M. Burton, one of the school's trustees, was one who put some of his own money into the school. When Burton was eighteen years old, he moved to Nashville to find work. After working as a day laborer for a year, Burton pulled his funds together with four other investors and started the Life and Casualty Insurance Company.¹³¹ By 1953, the Life and Casualty Insurance Company had sold more than one billion dollars of insurance. Thus, throughout Burton's life he was able to help several Christian schools financially.

Financial loss was only one of the two major problems for the Silver Point School. It was also difficult to find blacks in the mountainous region of Putnam County to attend classes. When plans were being made to move the school to Putnam County, Keeble

¹²⁸R. Vernon Boyd, *Undying Dedication*, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1985), 34.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁰Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 25.

¹³¹West, *The Search*, vol. 4, 68.

expressed his opposition to the move to Burton. “You can’t take the boy back to the plow, he would feel that he is not moving up much,” said Keeble, and he was right.¹³² Without a student body, all of the efforts to keep the school open were useless. The ten-year history of Silver Point was a period of struggle. It was also a proving ground for future schools for blacks. At the conclusion of the 1919-1920 school year, the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School closed its doors for good.

The Putnam County Normal and Industrial School story cannot be told properly without noting a few details about A. M. Burton. Burton, like many other whites of his era, viewed blacks as socially inferior to whites. After the Silver Point School, Burton’s next “colored project” was the Southern Practical Institute. In a report on the Southern Practical Institute, Burton said that the school’s purpose was “to train colored boys and girls to become self-respecting.”¹³³ While Burton was generous and sincere in his work with blacks, he clearly made a distinction between blacks and whites. Sadly, many whites believed that blacks, as socially unequal to whites, could never be “self respecting” without white involvement. One wonders why men who believed that God created all men equally would hold racist views?

Burton also exerted a tremendous amount of influence over black projects with which he worked. During a board meeting in 1914, the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School Board formally declared their disapproval of worship practices not found in the New Testament. Burton told the board that their declaration was a creed;

¹³²Keeble, Interview, tape 6, side 2.

¹³³A. M. Burton, “Southern Practical Institute,” *Gospel Advocate*, 62 (1920), 28.

therefore, Alexander Campbell wrote the following in the *Gospel Advocate*: “I have become convinced that the act of authorizing our names to be placed on the minutes saying that we will not fellowship certain preachers was denominational in nature, and, though, I did not consider it at the time, equivalent to writing a creed to govern the conduct or conscience of other men.”¹³⁴

Marshall Keeble, much to his credit, did not allow his white supporters to sway his views. Keeble read his Bible and believed it to be his sole guide through life. Because the New Testament discusses only one church, Keeble always stood against fellowship with denominations. When Keeble’s father-in-law died, Keeble wrote an article about Womack for the *Gospel Advocate*. In part, Keeble said that Womack did more to keep digressivism out of Tennessee than any other black preacher.¹³⁵ Keeble’s written statement is clearly a formal disapproval of worship practices not found in the New Testament. Furthermore, it was written with full knowledge of Burton’s stance against the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School Board’s registered statement. Allegations that Keeble was just another Uncle Tom are clearly unfounded.

In 1919 A. M. Burton purchased the Florence Crittenden Home in South Nashville for the purpose of beginning another school for blacks in Nashville.¹³⁶ George P. Bowser was hired by Burton to teach in the new Nashville school. After arriving at the school on January 1, 1920, Bowser was amazed that a school for blacks was being operated with the divisive attitude of Southern elitists. Burton’s Practical Institute demanded that black

¹³⁴Alexander Campbell, “Alexander Campbell Makes Acknowledgement,” *Gospel Advocate*, 56 (1914), 346.

¹³⁵Marshall Keeble, “Correspondence,” *Gospel Advocate*, 60 (1918), 213.

¹³⁶West, *The Search*, vol. 4, 253.

students use the back door to enter the school building.¹³⁷ The Putnam County Normal and Industrial School had struggled as it attempted to find black students to attend classes, but the Southern Practical Institute was located in one of Nashville's black neighborhoods. Mustering together a student body would not be Burton's problem in Nashville. On the first day of class, January 1, 1920, the Southern Practical Institute had forty students in attendance.¹³⁸

Bowser was in an uproar because of the conditions at the Southern Practical Institute. C. E. W. Dorris, appointed by Burton as the school's superintendent, was unwilling to change the school's "back door" policy. Marshall Keeble encouraged Bowser to work with Dorris in order to offer blacks the kind of education they needed.¹³⁹ If Bowser had possessed the patience and long-term vision embraced by Keeble, Bowser's influence might have been able to surpass Keeble's. However, Bowser did not have the stomach to work through the Southern Practical Institute's racism. For this he is to be commended. After his first week at the school, Bowser took Nathaniel Hogan¹⁴⁰ and returned to Louisville.¹⁴¹ Following Bowser's lead, the school's students let it be known that they were unwilling to be treated like inferiors. By the middle of February, the Southern Practical Institute had to close its doors.

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Boyd, *Undying Dedication*, 66.

¹⁴⁰For more information about Hogan see Rice, Ira Y. *Pressing Toward the Mark*, Vol. 1. Dallas: G. T. Press, 1998: 506-522.

¹⁴¹Boyd, *Undying Dedication*, 67.

With another failed school project under his belt, Burton retreated from black education and turned his attention and his financial backing David Lipscomb College.¹⁴² The next project for black education, among the Nashville area church of Christ, would turn into an outstanding success and an exemplary model for education in general. In 1920, the group responsible for establishing the Putnam County Normal and Industrial School purchased seven acres of land near Fisk University and began planning to open the Nashville Christian Institute.¹⁴³

The dream to build on the seven-acre site near Fisk University never came to fruition. Plans were made to open the school in 1923, but these plans were suspended.¹⁴⁴ Financial hardships and the Great Depression hindered the school's opening for a number of years. In 1939, the city of Nashville purchased for \$11,500 the seven acres of land that had been designated for the Nashville Christian Institute.¹⁴⁵ Upon the old Nashville Christian Institute site, the city of Nashville built the Ford Green Elementary School. In addition to purchasing the property from the Nashville Christian Institute, the city of Nashville gave the Nashville Christian Institute the Ashcraft City School.

A. C. Holt and Lacey Elrod worked toward refurbishing the property and gaining accreditation for the school. In 1940, the Nashville Christian Institute opened its doors,

¹⁴²Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 110.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴P. H. Black, "Nashville Christian Institute," *Gospel Advocate*, 65 (1923), 386.

¹⁴⁵West, *The Search*, vol. 4, 254.

with A. C. Holt as its first superintendent.¹⁴⁶ The Nashville Christian Institute did not begin with the kind of interest that was present when the Southern Practical Institute opened its doors. The new school began conducting classes with one teacher and two students.¹⁴⁷ Under Holt's administration, the school moved from a night school for adults to a fully accredited elementary and high school by 1942.¹⁴⁸ As the Nashville Christian Institute began to take root, A. M. Burton took notice and began to support the school. Marshall Keeble was on the board of directors when the school opened. When the Nashville Christian Institute became accredited, Keeble replaced Holt as the school's president.

With Burton's money and Keeble's fame, the Nashville Christian Institute was destined to influence many lives. The first obstacle Keeble had to overcome as the school's president was the Tennessee Board of Education. The Tennessee Board of Education wanted to know how a man with a seventh grade education would be able to run an accredited school. Burton was able to satisfy the school board by telling them, "You don't have to know anything to be a president of a school. Just the teachers need degrees."¹⁴⁹ A. M. Burton was clearly an influential figure in Nashville, Tennessee, by 1942.

The second obstacle the school had to overcome was generating the funding needed to keep the school open. By 1944, the school employed seven teachers and had an

¹⁴⁶Souvenir Book Committee, "Andrew Clarence Holt," *Nashville Christian Institute Reunion*, (Nashville: Nashville Christian Institute Reunion Committee, 2002), 28.

¹⁴⁷P. W. Stonestreet, "The Keeble Meeting," *Gospel Advocate*, 88 (1946), 731.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*; Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 113.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

enrollment of one hundred fifty students, with twenty-five students boarding at the school itself.¹⁵⁰ The school's expenses were averaging \$1,000 a month, and Keeble was responsible for raising the funding needed to keep the school operating. Keeble loved his work with the school so much that he spent the remainder of his life raising funds for it. In 1944, A. M. Burton gave the school \$50,000 "to make it one of the greatest Christian assets in the world."¹⁵¹ Marshall Keeble was the right person to make Burton's vision a reality.

Marshall Keeble was always true to his vision for the school. Marshall believed that "education must be interwoven and connected with the correct knowledge of Christ; otherwise the youth's foundation for resourceful and courageous Christian leadership becomes brittle."¹⁵² Keeble knew about resourcefulness and courage, and he knew that the children with whom he worked needed those qualities to make a difference in their world. As the president of the Nashville Christian Institute, Keeble was able to incorporate the kind of work ethic he learned as a boy into the school's instruction. Students were expected to learn and to perform to the best of their ability. The depth and intensity of instruction offered at the Nashville Christian Institute were tremendous. Under Keeble's administration, there was no room for laziness. Children were expected to take their studies seriously and accomplish the workload set before them.

Keeble often took some of the boys from the school on his evangelistic campaigns. These young boys amazed their audiences by the amount of Bible knowledge they

¹⁵⁰Marshall Keeble, "A Great Opportunity," *Gospel Advocate*, 86 (1944), 341.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Ibid.

possessed. In the summer of 1946, Keeble held a month long tent meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee.¹⁵³ Two tents were pitched, one for whites and the other for blacks. Crowds of fifteen hundred to two thousand gathered to hear Keeble preach the gospel. As the meeting was in progress, the Chattanooga Times reported that, “two eleven-year-old colored ‘preachers’ and an ‘old-timer’ of fourteen are laying down the gospel law to overflowing crowds at the Church of Christ tent meeting here and making them like it.”¹⁵⁴ The newspaper article went on to point out the fact that Keeble’s boys knew an amazing amount of Bible. Hassen Reed, the fourteen-year-old “old-timer” quoted the entire second chapter of Acts during one of his speaking sessions. The other two boys, William Robinson and Leroy Blackman, had also memorized scripture by the chapter. The fact that these boys were able to accompany Keeble and preach as they did, quoting lengthy passages from memory, testifies to the depth of instruction provided at the Nashville Christian Institute.

Phillip Hunton wrote a letter to the *Gospel Advocate*, which appeared in the June 5, 1947, issue of the journal. In his letter, Hunton praised Marshall Keeble for the great tent meeting he had recently conducted in Albany, Georgia. Hunton mentioned that whites and blacks “thronged” the place of meeting, and that seats were “reserved for white people.”¹⁵⁵ When Hunton made a distinction between the social status of whites and blacks, with blacks as the subordinate, he must have forgotten that in his Bible it is written:

¹⁵³ Stonestreet, “The Keeble Meeting,” 731.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Phillip L. Hunton, “Keeble and Boys at Albany, Ga.,” *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1947), 398.

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord of glory*, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4).¹⁵⁶

Hunton's letter also praised the Keeble boys who were with Marshall during his Albany meeting. Hunton said that these young men showed "so clearly the influence of good training, and a comprehensive study of the greatest Book of all ages."¹⁵⁷ As indicated by Hunton in his letter, by 1947 the Nashville Christian School was recognized as a pinnacle of academic excellence among Christians.

Keeble also directed his students in the area of good citizenship. Beginning in 1941, students from the Nashville Christian Institute conducted an annual Memorial Day program. Between 1941 and 1946, the program was conducted at Nashville's Central Church Building. Due to growing crowds the program had to be moved to the War Memorial Building in 1947. By 1947, there were over one hundred men enrolled in the school's speech program. The annual Memorial Day program was an opportunity for Keeble's school to demonstrate its abilities to the community, through the school's speech program.¹⁵⁸ It was said that the young men from Keeble's school were able to read their selections "with more spirited and accurate accent and clarity than most

¹⁵⁶*King James Version.*

¹⁵⁷Hunton, "Keeble and Boys," 398.

¹⁵⁸"Colored Singers, Speakers to be at War Memorial Building," *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1947), 349.

experienced preachers, white or black.”¹⁵⁹ Song leaders at these programs also impressed their audiences with the polished ability to get the pitch right every time.¹⁶⁰

The exposure Keeble’s students were giving the Nashville Christian Institute also helped Keeble to keep funding flowing into the school. As president of the school, Keeble promoted the school and its needs during his tent meetings. Often, collections were taken for the school at the conclusion of a Keeble meeting. The exposure of Keeble’s students also inspired others to begin schools similar to the Nashville Christian Institute. When Houston’s ninth annual lectureship for coloreds was announced, G. E. Steward mentioned that plans were underway to begin another school like Keeble’s in Texas.¹⁶¹ The following year a small school for blacks began in Fort Worth, Texas, under the name of Southern Bible Institute. During the summer of 1949, the Southern Bible Institute Board purchased property formally owned by the Texas Military College in Terrell. The school then relocated under the name, Southwestern Christian College, and it is still in operation today.¹⁶²

By 1947 The Nashville Christian Institute was a household name. Keeble’s influence was growing, as was the influence of his school. By examining issues of the *Gospel Advocate* between 1941 and 1947, it is evident that the Nashville Christian

¹⁵⁹“Colored Program at War Memorial, Sunday Afternoon,” *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1947), 366.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁶¹G. E. Stewart, “Colored Lectureship Announced,” *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1947), 912.

¹⁶²“The College History,” < <http://www.swcc.edu> > 2000, n. d. [accessed 26 November 2002].

Institute gained favor within the Church of Christ each year. The Nashville Christian Institute was also a community name in Nashville by this time, and it would stay that way until the school closed in June of 1967. As the news of the Keeble Boys began to spread, churches began to make appointments to have Keeble's students preach for them. Keeble's Boys were traveling to places as far away as Memphis, Birmingham, Louisville, and Cincinnati to preach on Sundays.¹⁶³ Through his barnstorming and his work with the Nashville Christian Institute, Marshall Keeble was able to establish a large network of church members sympathetic for Keeble's cause. Marshall Keeble's ultimate goal for the Nashville Christian Institute was obvious. Keeble wanted to leave hundreds of strong preachers behind after his death.¹⁶⁴ Keeble saw to it that his students received a good secular education, but that was secondary to their study of the Bible. As Keeble appealed to others to financially help the Nashville Christian Institute, he reminded them that "the Nashville Christian Institute offers everyone a chance to help build an institution where colored youth can be taught the word of God, with literary work and trades, as a Christian foundation for citizenship and service in establishing God's kingdom in the hearts of mankind."¹⁶⁵

The story of Marshall Keeble and his work with the Nashville Christian Institute cannot be told without mentioning Mary Campbell. For many years Campbell labored with Keeble and taught the school's speech classes. Keeble taught his students the word of God and Campbell taught them how to communicate that message. It was said that if

¹⁶³Marshall Keeble, "Nashville Christian Institute," *Gospel Advocate*, 89 (1947), 452.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Keeble, "A Great Opportunity," 341.

Mary Campbell had given a gift of one million dollars to the school, it would not have been as practical as the services she rendered to the school.¹⁶⁶

Each winter black preachers from all over the country would travel to the Nashville Christian Institute to attend short Bible courses and to receive training in sermon delivery and design. Those preachers would stay in Nashville from two to eight weeks in order to get as much help with their work as possible. Interestingly, during those workshops Mary Campbell would write sermons for illiterate preachers. In 1947, it was said that Mary Campbell had already written more sermons than most preachers of that day.¹⁶⁷ Campbell's work in this regard is novel for two reasons.

First of all, members of the Church of Christ are known for being people of the book. As people of the book, members of the Church of Christ believe in the authenticity and validity of Paul's charge not to "suffer a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man" (2 Tim. 2:12). Because this charge is located in a context that predates any social conventions, it is not a culturally constrained passage, but a passage given for all cultures. Marshall Keeble obviously realized the great contribution that Mary Campbell offered to his students. Keeble also knew that Campbell's service was offered in a setting outside of a church assembly, in a private setting, which would not violate Paul's mandate. Using Campbell as Keeble did opened the door for potential problems from those who would misunderstand Second Timothy 2:12, or from those who would misunderstand Campbell's work with the students of the Nashville Christian Institute.

¹⁶⁶"Colored Singers," 349.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

Instead of allowing the potential for problems to interfere with a good work, Keeble chose to use Mary Campbell to her fullest ability.

Secondly, it needs to be understood that in the early days of the civil rights movement men, black and white, did not pay too much attention to the abilities of women. Septima Clark is a significant figure in the civil rights movement. Clark served on the executive staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but the men on the staff did not pay much attention to Clark. This was tragic because Clark did so much to advance the civil rights cause. Clark said that the men with whom she worked on the SCLC “thought that women were sex symbols and had no contribution to make.”¹⁶⁸ One of the staff members, Reverend Abernathy, would often ask, “Why is Mrs. Clark on this staff?”¹⁶⁹ Sara Mitchell Parsons, a white civil rights activist who worked on the Atlanta School Board for equal educational privileges for blacks, told of similar problems in her memoirs. Sara Mitchell began her first term on the Atlanta Board of Education in 1962. Mitchell was amazed that a fellow black board member worked against her efforts to further the cause of black education in Atlanta. Dr. Clement continually voted against Parsons in racial matters, so Parsons confronted Dr. Clement about this problem. Dr. Clement responded, “Mrs. Mitchell, men do not like women who make decisions.”¹⁷⁰

Clearly, Keeble did not have the same attitude toward women adhered to by his contemporaries. Keeble was not only ahead of his time in the area of racism, but he was

¹⁶⁸Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Ready From Within*, (Trenton: African World Press Inc., 1990), 77.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰Sara Mitchell Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), 78.

ahead of his time in the area of women suffrage. The wonderful thing about all of this is that Keeble was able to develop his students' abilities with the help of Mary Campbell, and he did so while being true to his conservative convictions about the role of women in religious affairs. During the last decade of the twentieth century, conservative congregations of the Church of Christ were engaged in a controversy over the use of women translators in mission fields. Had Marshall Keeble still been alive, one does not have to wonder about the position Keeble would have taken on the woman translator issue. Furthermore, Keeble would have had much to offer the church in the way of peace and balance.

Keeble suffered from cataracts in his early sixties. Dr. John Ralph Rice removed the cataract from Keeble's left eye. While recovering, Keeble tore the bandages off of his eye, resulting in blindness in his left eye. Rice took Keeble to Vanderbilt University Hospital to remove the cataract from his right eye. In order to keep Marshall from total blindness, his second wife Laura Keeble, Lambert Campbell, and Mary Campbell took turns guarding Keeble around the clock.¹⁷¹ The working relationship between Campbell and Keeble was truly altruistic.

When Marshall Keeble retired from his duties as the president of the Nashville Christian Institute in 1958, Lucien Palmer replaced him for a brief period. Willy Cato then replaced Palmer as the school's president. Cato and Keeble worked together closely until Keeble's death in 1968. Keeble was retained as the Nashville Christian Institute's President Emeritus and in this capacity Keeble worked with Cato to keep the school open and prospering. No other white man worked as closely with Keeble as did Willy Cato.

¹⁷¹Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 120.

Cato often drove Keeble around the country so that Keeble could keep his speaking appointments. If any man knew Marshall Keeble, it was Willy Cato. Cato said that Keeble taught him to feel kindly toward the unkind.¹⁷² He often spoke of Keeble's ability to soften the hearts of those who opposed his work.

Sadly, Keeble and Cato were unable to keep the Nashville Christian Institute open and flourishing. The continual financial demands associated with accreditation, teacher salaries,¹⁷³ and declining enrollment finally drove the school to its closure in June of 1967.¹⁷⁴ Today the Nashville Christian Institute Alumni Association still conducts regular meetings and enjoys the bond that was cemented through their days at Keeble's school. On April 12, 2000, a historical marker for Marshall Keeble was unveiled in Nashville, acknowledging the greatness of a man who profoundly impacted so many lives.

Throughout the process of Keeble's barnstorming, coupled together with Keeble's ability to network through the Nashville Christian Institute, Marshall Keeble was slowly tearing down the racially biased barrier existing in the Church of Christ. One of Keeble's sermons, made famous at the Valdosta meeting of 1931, was entitled "Nothing Too Hard for the Lord."¹⁷⁵ During this sermon, Keeble forcefully preached about how the Lord overcomes all obstacles placed before his people. Keeble was able to preach this sermon

¹⁷²Willy Cato, "Keeble as a Teacher," *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 459.

¹⁷³By 1967, teachers with the Nashville Christian Institute were paid half the wages of Nashville public school teachers.

¹⁷⁴Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 126.

¹⁷⁵Marshall Keeble, "Nothing Too Hard for the Lord," *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble Evangelist*, ed. B. C. Goodpasture, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1931), 66-82.

with conviction because he deeply believed that the only way to overcome the obstacles and hardships of life is by trusting God. Nothing else will explain why Keeble continued to place himself in situations that could have cost him his life.

While preaching, “Nothing Too Hard for the Lord,” Keeble told his Valdosta audience, “Now, I believe I will say this—I don’t think anybody in town will bother me—I don’t think you will do it—I liked to have said, I dare you to bother me. I believe I will say it.”¹⁷⁶ By 1931, Keeble had already suffered much because of his work, so he knew that statements like the aforementioned could carry extreme consequences. This is especially true when the aforementioned statement is viewed within the context of challenging men, Southern whites, to defend their denominational teachings and prove Keeble wrong. While preaching like this on one occasion in west Tennessee, a white man told Keeble that if he kept on preaching as he was, he would have to leave town or be killed.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Keeble trusted in the God of the Bible and expected God’s care and protection daily.

Keeble’s deep seated and abiding trust was infused into the character of his students. By the end of the 1940s, Keeble’s network was teeming with young protégées expressing all of the sentiment and conviction of their instructor and mentor. Soon the Supreme Court would change the status of blacks in America, opening the door to better opportunities for black Americans. Within the Church of Christ, racial changes were made because of Keeble’s work, and through the work of his students. As Keeble’s reputation grew, so did his ability to soften the hearts of Christians all over the nation.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 77.

¹⁷⁷ Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 107.

As hard as it has been for some to admit, instead of accepting racism in the church, Keeble worked to eradicate it.

Marshall Keeble was once invited by the Union Avenue Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee to hold one of his tent meetings. On the first night of the meeting Keeble noticed that a rope was used to segregate the audience. Keeble refused to preach under those conditions. He said, “I can’t preach over those ropes.”¹⁷⁸ Keeble then took up the ropes, placed them behind the pulpit, and then went on to preach the gospel, which was given to all men. Choate claimed, “Keeble never preached a sermon on segregation.”¹⁷⁹ However, the facts speak otherwise. As Keeble’s influence grew, so did his vocal stance against racism. As Keeble became more vocal against racism, the perception that he tolerated Southern racism diminished. Choate seemed to acknowledge this to a certain degree when he wrote, “Keeble knew how to work on white audiences without ever touching them.”¹⁸⁰ Keeble did not hide the fact that part of his work was aimed at ending segregation.¹⁸¹

One of the keys to really knowing a man is to observe how he obtains his goal, rather than observing his failure. When a man fails, his pride will often guise his true nature. When a man succeeds his true nature will shine. Keeble’s success revealed a humble and honest man of great strength and courage, and a man who was unwilling to

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 106.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 107.

¹⁸¹Marshall Keeble, *Turned Loose*, (Henderson, TN.: Freed-Hardeman University, 1962), cassette tape.

accept any injustice. Irene Moody expressed her appreciation for Marshall Keeble with the following words:

Hats off to Marshall Keeble,
Whose equal is hard to find,
He meets and greets all people
As he stands in the righteous line.
Recommended to fellow Christians,
By Annie C. Tuggle and others,
He has lived the truth and taught it
Oft times with many a struggle.
Though meek and lowly of birth,
He is honored and esteemed by all,
Numbered with great men on earth,
He works like the Apostle Paul.
Who is this Marshall Keeble?
A stranger may ask to know,
He is God's ambassador to people
And is always on the go.¹⁸²

In 1965, three years before Keeble's death, Harding University awarded Marshall Keeble with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.¹⁸³ What a tremendous honor for a man who did so much to make life better for whites and blacks alike. Keeble was inspired by the attention given to him by his white brethren.¹⁸⁴ Keeble's work toward a better world for all men through the field of education was a great inspiration to others. Once while discussing his preaching students Marshall Keeble wrote, "If they continue as they are, some day they will make wonderful gospel preachers."¹⁸⁵ If Keeble were still alive

¹⁸²Irene P. Moody, *Souvenir Honoring Evangelist Marshall Keeble*, Original in the hand of Jack Wooten, private collection, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹⁸³Linda T. Wynn, "Leaders of Afro-American Nashville," (Nashville: Nashville Christian Institute Reunion Committee, 2002), 17.

¹⁸⁴Marshall Keeble, "Keeble Held Dallas Meeting," *Gospel Advocate*, 83 (1941), 21.

¹⁸⁵Marshall Keeble, "Students are Baptized," *Gospel Advocate*, 86 (1944), 855.

today, he would be inspired by the success of many of his students.

CHAPTER 5

TRIALS FROM WITHIN AND FROM WITHOUT

Many Americans who lived through the civil rights era are still living and vividly remember the former struggles with American bigotry. Although the problem of racism has not been eradicated, younger Americans have not known the depths of their forefathers' racism. Living in 2003 makes it difficult for many to understand the kind of pressure placed on early to middle twentieth century blacks in America. While the civil rights battle was fought on many fronts, Marshall Keeble was undoubtedly the Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Church of Christ. Several unkind and racially motivated circumstances surrounding the work of Marshall Keeble have been previously noted. The focus of this chapter is to highlight some additional problems faced by Keeble from within the Church of Christ and by individuals outside of the Church of Christ. Keeble's reaction to the events noted herein provides further evidence that Keeble was working to break the ice away from the frozen racial conditions in the Church. Rather than being trapped by circumstance, Keeble was able to use the circumstances he faced in life to help him with his cause.

As plans were being laid to purchase a site for the Nashville Christian Institute, not everyone in Nashville was pleased. The elders of the Twelfth Avenue Church of Christ were among the dissatisfied crowd. In a letter to A. M. Burton, Frank J. Orndorff, Earl Hutcheson, and R. L. Truett wrote:

We do not question your purchase of this property or any other property. However, as elders of this congregation and residents of this community we view with concern the use of this property as a center for Negroes.

There are five white congregations of the Church of Christ in this vicinity. When word of your intended use of this property becomes known to the public

there will be a severe reaction of protest and great bitterness in case you should go through with your plans. We feel that our congregation and also the others would be crippled in a short time because of the loss of much of our present membership and the hostility of the public to the Church of Christ (white or colored) if this Negro school were established.

We want you to understand that our opposition is not personal. We would oppose the present owners or any successors thereto if they should attempt the establishment of a Negro project. We wish to commend you for the many good works you have done; for your interest in the colored people; and we sincerely hope and pray that God will give you many more years to live and labor. However we feel that the placing or enlarging of such a school as you propose in an area where colored people completely live and predominate would be much better for all parties concerned.¹⁸⁶

Every step taken toward the betterment of blacks with whom Keeble was working was difficult. White Christians in Nashville were not opposed to black education as long as the educating did not take place within the eyeshot of whites. Racially motivated whites worked hard to maintain the racial color line. Keeble's philosophy about the racial color line was, "All you need is the Spirit of Christ, it will win every time. Just cover up that color line with the Spirit of Christ."¹⁸⁷

While working to cover up the racial color line, Keeble would often preach his parable about Peter and the Gentile conversions, and both blacks and whites would shout, amen, amen!¹⁸⁸ In his 1964 interview, J. E. Choate stated, "Brother Keeble, you started integrating Lipscomb more than thirty years ago, and they didn't even know what you were doing, did they?" "It was that way many times in those days," was Keeble's reply.

¹⁸⁶Frank J. Orndorff, Earl Hutcheson, and R. L. Truett to A.M. Burton, n.d. Marshall Keeble Collection, Beaman Library, David Lipscomb University, Nashville.

¹⁸⁷ Keeble, Interview, tape 4, side 2.

¹⁸⁸See chapter 2.

However, there were prominent men in the Church of Christ who were not shouting amen to the no respect of persons message.

By 1941 Foy E. Wallace Jr. was a household name within the Church of Christ. Wallace was an experienced and accomplished preacher, writer, and debater. G. H. P. Showalter noted that Wallace was “both popular and unpopular in the superlative degree.”¹⁸⁹ Earl West complimented Wallace by stating, “No man ever had a more complete knowledge of the Bible, nor believed its revelations more implicitly.”¹⁹⁰ Foy E. Wallace, Jr. was also a man who was filled with racial prejudice. In his 1941 article “Negro Meetings For White People,” Wallace expressed disapproval over whites socializing with blacks at meetings.¹⁹¹ He suggested that whites were actually ruining African Americans by mixing with them. Wallace went so far in this article to even claim that he was a better preacher than any black preacher of his day.¹⁹²

Marshall Keeble responded to Wallace in wisdom:

FROM M. KEEBLE

Dear Sir and Brother in Christ:

For over thirty years I have tried to conduct my work just as your article in the *Bible Banner* of March suggested. Taking advice from such friends as you have been for years has been a blessing to my work.

So I take the privilege to thank you for that instructive and encouraging article. I hope I can conduct myself in my last days so that you and none of my

¹⁸⁹West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 4, 164. G. H. P. Showalter, “As Editor at Large,” *Firm Foundation* 58 (February 1941), 4.

¹⁹⁰West, *Ancient Order*, vol. 4, 164.

¹⁹¹Foy E. Wallace, Jr., “Negro Meetings For White People,” *Bible Banner* (March 1941), 7.

¹⁹²Wallace’s entire article may be read in appendix 1.

friends will have to take back nothing they have said complimentary about my work or regret it.

Please continue to encourage me in my work and *pray for me*.

Fraternally yours,

M. Keeble."¹⁹³

By responding as he did, Keeble was able to get his reply printed by Wallace in the *Banner of Truth*. All of the people who read Wallace's bitter attack on the black man were able to read a soft answer designed to turn away wrath and to keep the church from further division.

During his interview with Choate, Keeble said, "The racial problem was bad on both sides, and preachers on both sides don't know how to handle it, and that makes it worse. The preacher gets in the pulpit and fans it." The point at which the racial division in the Church of Christ started turning, according to Keeble, was when he began speaking on the annual David Lipscomb Lectureship. Keeble believed that Lipscomb and the other founding men of the school had that in mind. "They never heard of that word 'integration,' but they hoped that some day the nigger would go to school here."¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, David Lipscomb would not attend a church unless blacks and whites could worship together. Keeble said that Lipscomb "just had that spirit in him, he didn't treat a white man better than he did a nigger."

R. N. Hogan (1903-1997), through *The Christian Echo*, was fanning part of the trouble about which Keeble was speaking. Hogan's pen and preaching were reminiscent of W. T. Sherman's scorched earth policy in Georgia. Hogan was attempting to cut a swath through the heart of the church's racial center, and he wanted immediate results.

¹⁹³ Marshall Keeble, "From M. Keeble," *Bible Banner* (April 1941), 5.

¹⁹⁴ Keeble, Interview, tape 3, side 2.

Hogan began an article dealing with segregation with the following, “It is my personal observation that most of our Brethren who are in high places in the church of our Lord, are going to lose their souls because they are respecters of persons. That being a respecter of persons is a sin is without question, for the Bible plainly says that it is a sin.”¹⁹⁵ He continued his apology by stating:

Then there are the so-called christian schools to which every nationality can attend but the Negro. A fine young gospel Minister, as clean as christians come, well qualified, has just received a letter from one of the biggest so-called christian schools in the Brotherhood turning him down, rejecting his application to enter a christian(?) school to be taught the word of God only because he is a Negro, only because of the color of his skin. They use to hide behind the law, but our government has informed the entire country that the practice of segregation because of race or color is unconstitutional. But christians shouldn't have to be told that. Philipinos, Japanese, Chinese, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans, Russians, Koreans, Mexicans, and every nationality but the Negro are welcome to these schools, and they call them christian schools.

These schools have men who call themselves God's Elders who are on the Board of Directors and preacher Presidents who call themselves servants of God. Yet, the sin of the 'pride of life' that makes them feel that they are the superior race, the tradition of men that is causing them to lay aside the commandments of God and ignore the 'every creature' that Jesus wants taught is also causing them to reject applications of Negroes to enter christian schools(?) and be taught the Bible.¹⁹⁶

Hogan's indignation is understandable, yet Hogan did not have the experience and ability to deal with the Church's racial center, as did Keeble. Among other things, Keeble wanted to do his best to keep the Church from creating more factions than already existed.

Two months after writing the aforementioned article, an angered Hogan directly attacked

¹⁹⁵R. N. Hogan, “The Sin of Being a Respector of Persons,” *The Christian Echo* 54 (June 1959), 2, 5.

¹⁹⁶*Ibid.*

the Church's leaders of segregation in the article "Enemies of Righteousness."¹⁹⁷

Keeble counseled Hogan not to press the segregation issue as he was pressing it, much to Hogan's disapproval. Keeble said about Hogan, "He's crazy, fighting his friends, he thinks he's smart."¹⁹⁸ The problem was that Hogan was creating a split within the black ranks of the Church of Christ. Just as a younger generation grew weary with Martin Luther King, Jr's progress and sought a more radical approach to change, there was a younger generation of blacks in the Church of Christ growing weary with Marshall Keeble's leadership. R. N. Hogan was Bowser's¹⁹⁹ protégée and affiliated with the work Bowser was doing in Terrell, Texas. Keeble suggests that his caution and careful aim kept the black segment of the Church of Christ from splitting.

I just went to their lectureships over there in Terrell, they didn't come to mine. They had done drawn the line, but it takes two of you to draw the line, and what kept the line from being drawn was that I was there every time they opened the door. I knew what I was doing. He [Bowser] would have died and left us divided. As it is he died and didn't leave us nothing.²⁰⁰

Keeble was clearly displeased with the direction being taken by the college in Terrell. However, as was his custom, he kept working to help the school in Terrell. Keeble also mentioned to Choate that he was trying to get a young dean at the school, a man named Jack Evens (currently the president of Southwestern Christian College), to return his phone calls so that Keeble could help Southwestern raise some desperately needed funds for its continuance. Marshall Keeble had the keen ability to look beyond the petty

¹⁹⁷ In order project the full impact of Hogan's pen, the entire article may be read in appendix 2.

¹⁹⁸ Keeble, Interview, tape 3, side 2.

¹⁹⁹ For more information on Bowser see chapter 3.

²⁰⁰ Keeble, Interview, tape 3 side 2.

problems of the day to the way things could be. He also had the resolve not to get caught up in the problems created by a younger, more impulsive generation. Keeble and Hogan were working for the same cause. One wonders what kind of success would have followed had Hogan adapted to Keeble's battle plan. It was, after all, Keeble who was continually invited to speak at these segregated schools, and when he did he too went to work on the church's racial center.

During one of Keeble's evangelistic campaigns in Florida he baptized 286 people at Bregdon and established the Church there. This congregation took root and was off to a good beginning. When Keeble traveled through Florida he would often take time to visit this church and help in their work. In time Keeble worked with the church in ordaining elders. On one occasion when Keeble was in town the preacher of this church told Keeble that the elders were paying his utilities, but they had cut out the rest of his salary. The corruption of those elders brought out the lion-like characteristic of Marshall Keeble. That Sunday morning when Keeble entered the pulpit to preach, with five hundred people in attendance, he immediately began to rebuke those elders. He said, "I didn't know that brethren could get so deceitful and sinful that they would take a colored preacher's salary and call themselves raising him."²⁰¹ While Keeble was rebuking those men, he watched them glow in anger. Finally, those two elders got up and walked out of the auditorium. When they came back in they approached the pulpit and told Keeble that they were resigning as elders. Keeble looked at one of the elders and said, "Now you resign, I accept your resignation, I don't read in the Bible where the apostles ever did, but I will

²⁰¹Keeble, Interview, tape 8, side 1.

accept your resignation.”²⁰² He then looked at the other elder and said, “Yours is accepted. You are no longer elders in this congregation.” Later Keeble said, “I ain’t never heard of no preacher taking resignations, they had me on the spot so I said, ‘alright your resignations are accepted.’” After the church dismissed services that morning, none of the church’s five hundred members came up to these men to console them. Keeble said that these two brethren “needed a good spanking, if I had let them by they would have been ruined for life. . . . I didn’t stop until I got them well fixed! . . . The Bible says to rebuke them before all that others may fear, and it’s talking about the elders too”²⁰³

These two men followed Keeble to West Palm Beach, where he was preaching a meeting, and apologized to Keeble for the way they had been treating their preacher. Keeble replied, “You have done nothing to me, you go back up there Sunday morning and walk out and ask the whole church to forgive you.” After repenting, the church accepted those two men back into the eldership and they died as elders of that congregation and friends of Marshall Keeble.

When a man needed to be rebuked, white or black, Keeble was going to give it to him. On one occasion when Keeble was at the Lipscomb Lectureship he said that as he was walking to the stage to speak he overheard several of H. Leo Boles’ students arguing with Boles and challenging him to a debate. Keeble said that after he was introduced to speak, “I commenced on those fellows for rebuking brother Boles. I said, ‘the very idea of a man that made everyone of you what you are and you get up here and challenged

²⁰²Ibid.

²⁰³Ibid.

him for a debate.”²⁰⁴ The ironic thing about this event is that it took place in a white college auditorium and many of those present commended Keeble for rebuking those young preachers.

In addition to working through racial problems, Marshall Keeble also faced many angry men, black and white, because he challenged their religion. Keeble said that men would often threaten him while he was preaching. Once when Keeble told a black audience that they could not get religion, a black man near him said in a loud voice, “That damn nigger ought to be knocked off!”²⁰⁵

While discussing with Choate the problems he faced with the KKK, Keeble said, “What they were mad about [was] white people attending. They (the KKK) couldn’t accomplish what they wanted with them mixing like that. I can tell you confidentially, that was our problem throughout the South. I had to know how to meet this man, this white man, or else I get hurt ... the white man had control as he does today.”²⁰⁶ Keeble knew that this embedded ethos was impenetrable from a direct attack, so he mastered the art of making the white man his friend as he worked on the white man’s conscience. By way of example Keeble told Choate:

One white man told the Negroes, he said now, “You niggers has just gone wild over this guy. You don’t know where he is from.” So he come out to hear me, “I’m going out there, you just left your church up there on the hill, and you let a man you don’t know in, so I’m coming out there.” They come out with the big wide brim hats on, looked like

²⁰⁴Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., tape 3, side 2.

²⁰⁶Ibid.

they would just eat you up. Great big fellows, right red you know. I'd say so many things about the Baptists and Methodists and he'd go to laughing, you know. And you know they got to going around and said, "I hear the man last evening, he ought to have been here a long time ago. You niggers, I want every last one of you to go out there." In those days if he told them to go to a meeting they'd go. ... I made him (the white man) treat them better. I was preaching to him along with the nigger, he just got his dose right along with the rest of them. I could see it working. I made a many a white man just let up on his strictness on the Negro.²⁰⁷

On one occasion while Keeble was in Florence, Alabama, he noticed a large crowd listening to a "Sanctified Preacher" play a guitar and beat a drum, while his wife was playing a tambourine. As soon as they finished, Keeble stepped into the midst of the crowd and said, "Just a minute ladies and gentlemen, just a few minutes, I have a few things to tell you that this brother didn't tell you. He didn't tell you, and I want to inform you that neither the apostles, none of them ever beat a drum and had their wives following them around with a tambourine. That ain't in the Scriptures nowhere, nowhere!"²⁰⁸ Keeble went on to inform the crowd that this "Sanctified Preacher" also failed to tell them the true significance of baptism, which was apparently too much for the "Sanctified Preacher's" wife. She began to chase Keeble and swing at him with her tambourine while her husband was running along her side with his drumstick in his hand. Keeble was forced to leave his work that day.

²⁰⁷Keeble, Interview, tape 3, Side 2.

²⁰⁸Keeble, Interview, tape 3, side 1.

In 1961 Fidelity Film Productions was preparing to make a film of Marshall Keeble's life. Samuel E. Blackwell, assistant manager of Fidelity Film Productions, wrote Keeble on February 24, 1961, seeking Keeble's written permission to use the script that had been prepared for the film. It appears that Fidelity Film Productions was attempting to fit Keeble into the stereotypical Tom role. As noted by Bogle, "Audiences rejected even subtle modifications of the black caricatures."²⁰⁹ Keeble reviewed the script and replied to Blackwell on March 4, 1961. If Blackwell assumed that he was dealing with a Tom, he was mistaken. Marshall Keeble did not simply submit to the way Fidelity Film Productions wanted to portray him. Keeble wrote to Blackwell and asked that the following changes be made to the script:

I am of the opinion that the person who is to portray me must not use dialect that is unnatural to my way of speaking. The viewers of my race would resent this affectation, since most of them have missed the joy of knowing and loving the grand old characters of the past. For instance, Under scenes No. 14, 16 and 18, I am sure that I have never used the dialect of 'suh' for sir. In scene No. 28, I would prefer to say brethren, or brother and sisters, instead of children.²¹⁰

Keeble also asked Blackwell to use "never" instead of "neber." The script presented Keeble as being a lonely man after the death of his first wife Minnie. Keeble asked Blackwell to mention the fact that he was blessed with the comfort of two godly women. Laura was just as important to Keeble's work as was Minnie. The movie script also failed to mention anything about the Nashville Christian Institute, and Marshall wanted some information about the school mentioned in the film.

²⁰⁹Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, (New York: Continuum, 2001), 17.

²¹⁰Marshall Keeble, to Mr. Samuel Blackwell. 4 March 1961. Marshall Keeble Collection, Special Collections, Beaman Library. David Lipscomb University, Nashville.

On March 16, 1961, Mr. Blackwell wrote to Marshall Keeble and said, “In reply to your letter of March 4th and the corrections that you have suggested on your story. We have taken these into account and have made them as you suggested.”²¹¹ Contrary to Blackwell’s words, Keeble’s suggestions were largely ignored by Fidelity Film Productions. The goal of Fidelity Film Productions is unclear. Did Mr. Blackwell assume that he would be able to push Keeble until Keeble would agree to the script as written by the film company? This is a question that may never be answered. However, it is clear that Keeble was going to stand firm on his conviction that changes needed to be made in the script. Keeble responded to Blackwell by stating:

After reading the second draft of the story, I find many of the changes that I suggested were not made. Will you please consider these suggestions?

I am still of the opinion that I am not out of order in asking the inclusion of my present wife. I am also anxious for the grave scene not to leave the impression that the members of the Church of our Lord believe in communication with the dead.²¹²

For reasons that are unknown, the film was never produced. The dialogue between Keeble and Blackwell is of interest inasmuch as it reveals Keeble as a man who was firm in conviction, unlike the submissive Tom character he has been accused of being. Keeble knew how to work with both whites and blacks without creating dead ends in his work. Rather than being worn out on the battlefield, Keeble wore out many battlefields by his steadfast conviction.

Marshall Keeble worked through the trials of his day to help make a better day for others. While facing perils from within and without, he did not allow himself to be

²¹¹Mr. Samuel E. Blackwell, to Marshall Keeble. 16 March, 1961. Marshall Keeble Collection, Special Collections, Beaman Library. David Lipscomb University, Nashville.

²¹²Marshall Keeble, to Mr. Samuel Blackwell. 28 March 1961. Marshall Keeble Collection, Special Collections, Beaman Library. David Lipscomb University, Nashville.

overcome with discouragement. Marshall Keeble kept the same pace and preached the same message throughout his life. There were always those among the ranks of blacks and whites who thought that Keeble was too submissive or a Tom who knew his place. Those ideas are not consistent with the life of the man most responsible for chipping the ice away from the frozen racial condition in the twentieth century church of Christ in America.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Marshall Keeble was able to do what no other man, black or white, was able to do for the twentieth century Church of Christ in America. Building upon the foundation given to him by parents who respected life, Marshall Keeble was able to better himself and his people. Rising above the seemingly overwhelming odds of the day, and without the aid of any human institution or organization behind him and supporting his work, Keeble was able to gather the funds needed to take his message from the east coast to the west coast, and abroad. Ironically, people who did not want their social system changed sent funds to Keeble for his work, and Keeble used those funds to erase color lines in the Church. As stated by Keeble himself, this racial system was what he “tried to get rid of.”²¹³

Earlier writers were either unable to discuss Keeble’s fight against racism and be published, or they were blind to Keeble’s goal. Therefore, whites often viewed Keeble from their own ethos and falsely assumed that Keeble was a Tom who knew his place and kept it. Some blacks also misunderstood Keeble and saw him as an instrument of the oppressive white man. During the early 1960s Keeble came under significant pressure from some blacks to take a militant stand on integration. Keeble’s response to that pressure reveals much about why he worked as he did to erase the color line of segregation. “Anything you have to force a man to do just isn’t worth it. ... Integration?

²¹³Keeble, Interview, tape 7, side 1.

I would rather we get it slow than get it wrong.”²¹⁴ Throughout his life, Keeble was slowly and deliberately making needed changes in the church of Christ.

J. E Choate’s interview with Marshall Keeble is a valuable and needed tool to better understand Keeble and the racial issue. Keeble would often mention his position on racial matters to Choate, knowing that Choate would not mention those matters in his biography of Keeble. At times Keeble would tell Choate that he was speaking in confidence; however, it is clear that Keeble also knew that Choate would not write about the racial fight in the Church. From Keeble’s perspective, to be portrayed in the same light as Bowser and Hogan would have hindered Keeble’s influence and created further division in the church. The fact that information about racism exists on those tapes implies that Keeble understood that a time was coming when the racial issue could be freely discussed among members of the Church of Christ. The expanse of Keeble’s life indicated that Marshall Keeble was a man who calculated a move before he made it. It may be that Keeble divulged the information that he did during that interview because he knew its value for future generations. Keeble knew that his life would one day be placed into its proper context.

A. M. Burton, who supported Keeble’s work for several decades, was opposed to integrating. Burton’s idea was to teach blacks the Bible and a trade. Keeble said that Burton’s Silver Point project “made us think that he wanted us still to work and farm.”²¹⁵ While Keeble was running the Nashville Christian Institute Burton took him to Dickson,

²¹⁴Marshall Keeble, “Brother Keeble and the Lord,” by George Baker, *The Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, (29 March 1964), 15.

²¹⁵Keeble, Interview, tape 7, side 1.

Tennessee to look at some property to repeat the Silver Point experiment with the work Keeble was doing in Nashville. To Keeble this was an unacceptable hindrance to the development of the black man. Because Keeble wanted to make friends with all people, he was able to maintain his relationship with Burton and use Burton's money to keep his work alive. It was Keeble's conviction that attitudes like Burton's kept the Church of Christ from leading the fight for integration. "We should have led, I would have been so glad if we could have led this. Why we missed many a man who would have been in the church of Christ if we would have led it," said Keeble.²¹⁶

What was Keeble's goal for his life's work? Keeble wanted to help his people know the God of the Bible as Keeble knew him. As he labored, Keeble was content to let the gospel slowly break down the imperfections in the people around him. Because the color line was not pronounced in the Bible, Keeble worked hard to erase that line, as it existed in the Church of Christ. Keeble was content to work slowly throughout his life to chip away at the racial ice of the day. Fortunately, before Keeble died he was able to go beyond merely chipping away at that ice and turn on the defroster. Keeble's Abilene speech has been mentioned in chapter three. As far as Oklahoma Christian University is concerned, Keeble raised \$50,000 for that school in 1963. Keeble said. "After the people there had a little while to think it over they decided they could not take the money I raised and turn our colored children away. Now the school is integrated. That's the only way to integration."²¹⁷ Keeble knew that his approach worked and that it was in full agreement with the gospel that he preached.

²¹⁶Ibid.

²¹⁷Keeble, "Brother Keeble," 15.

One of the brighter clouds overshadowing the twentieth century Church of Christ was Marshall Keeble. Keeble was for everyone in an altruistic way that cannot be denied. No man would continually suffer, as did Keeble, if this were not the case. While the racial color line has not been totally eradicated in the Church of Christ, there are many congregations wherein the color line is a thing of the past. Standing as a tribute to the foundation laid by Keeble, integrated congregations are becoming more and more common. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to see racially integrated couples holding membership in the Church of Christ and being accepted by many.

Marshall Keeble accomplished many things in his life. On March 24, 1956, President Hugh H. Tiner of George Pepperdine College presented Keeble with a citation, which reads in part: “In expression of its appreciation for his bringing multiplied thousands to Christ.”²¹⁸ The Business and Professional Women’s Club honored Keeble on December 4, 1954, as “The Man of the Hour.”²¹⁹ Tennessee Governor Frank G. Clement on December 6, 1965 appointed Keeble “Colonel Aide-De-Camp.”²²⁰ On December 7, 1965, Keeble received a plaque from Nashville’s mayor Beverly Briley with the inscription: “In grateful recognition of Marshall Keeble for his long time service to his God and to his fellow man, preaching and teaching the gospel, baptizing 30,000 souls and establishing 350 congregations. His life’s work including his appointment as President Emeritus of Nashville Christian Institute is a shining example of good

²¹⁸J. E. Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, xiii.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*

²²⁰*Ibid.*

citizenship.”²²¹ While in Nigeria in 1960, Keeble was given a robe and was made chief of the Paramount Tribe.²²² During the last week of Keeble’s life he traveled to Rochester, Michigan, where he was once again honored for his many years of dedication and service to the gospel of Christ.²²³

One of the greatest accomplishments in Keeble’s life has to be the number of young men he trained to preach the gospel. “Keeble’s boys,” as they were called, often accompanied Keeble to his meetings. Keeble used his boys to extend the gospel’s invitation before presenting his sermon. Keeble directly influenced countless numbers of people. It is estimated that Keeble actually baptized about 40,000 people, many of whom were white, during his career. Keeble’s work lives on through the young men he trained to follow in his steps.

Keeble’s work not only helped the Church of Christ move beyond the ugliness of racism but in an indirect way Keeble was instrumental to the civil rights movement at large. One of “Keeble’s boys” was a zealous boy named Fred D Gray.²²⁴ After studying at the Nashville Christian Institute, Gray went to Alabama State College, and finally to Case Western Reserve University, where he earned a law degree. Fred Gray works as a gospel preacher as trained by Keeble, and he also works as an attorney as trained at Case.

²²¹Ibid.

²²²Marshall Keeble, *From Mule Back to Super Jet With the Gospel*, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1962), 33.

²²³“The Last Week of his Life,” *Gospel Advocate*, 110 (1968), 456-457.

²²⁴A photograph of Fred Gray and other Keeble Boys sitting with Marshall Keeble is located on page 121 in *Roll Jordan Roll*.

Interestingly, Fred Gray, only a few months out of law school, and at age twenty-four, represented Mrs. Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus. Gray was also Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s first civil rights lawyer, and Gray is well known for his work as an attorney in many notable civil rights cases over the years of his career.²²⁵ In 1974 Fred Gray integrated the black Church of Christ in Tuskegee, Alabama with the white Church of Christ in that community, wherein he serves as an elder.²²⁶

Laura Katherine Keeble was very much part of Marshall's life and work. Keeble expressed his disappointment to Mr. Blackwell of Fidelity Film Productions for not mentioning Laura in the proposed script for the Keeble Story.

Minnie Keeble died in 1932. Marshall remained single for two years following Minnie's death. Keeble was joking with Percy Ricks one day and said, "Some of you boys ought to find me a wife."²²⁷ Percy Ricks then introduced Marshall to his sister-in-law, Laura Johnson. Percy told Marshall that Laura was the best of the whole Johnson crop. A local preacher who knew Laura told Marshall that Laura was the best flower out of the whole rose garden. Marshall began writing Laura, and from the very first he made his intentions of marriage known to her. Interestingly, Marshall and Laura never dated. Keeble said, "It always did disgust me to see a preacher flirting around with women. ... So I said, 'If I ever get single I am not going to court and chase a woman.'"²²⁸ During his

²²⁵Fred Gray, *Background*, <<http://www.fredgray.net/brackgroung.html>>, n. d. [accessed 12 September 2003].

²²⁶The Legacy, "Fred Gray." <<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/legacy/spreading.html>>. n. d. [accessed 22 September 2003].

²²⁷Keeble, Interview, tape 9, side 1.

²²⁸Keeble, Interview, tape 1, side 1.

courtship with Laura, Marshall was never alone with her for five minutes. Keeble corresponded with her, but he did not go to her home to visit her.

Laura said that at first she was afraid of what was transpiring, “There is about twenty years difference in our age, and I was afraid that I just couldn’t come up to being a preacher’s wife.”²²⁹ Marshall would write Laura two or three letters without receiving a reply. Marshall worried that Laura was not going to reply, but eventually she would. Laura said that she was just taking time to trying to decide whether or not she could come up to Keeble’s standard. Finally in 1934 Marshall Keeble and Laura Johnson were married by Keeble’s friend B. C. Goodpasture.

Marshall Keeble’s main interests in life were God, his school, and his wife, in that order. This arrangement was understood and accepted by Laura.²³⁰ In fact, this arrangement has been a tremendous blessing in Laura’s life. At 104 years of age in 2002, Laura Keeble wrote a letter that was printed in the Nashville Christian Institute Reunion book, in which she stated:

I have not birth [sic] children of my own but being married to Marshall Keeble allowed me the opportunity to have you all. I go to bed early at night and the nurses always say to me “Mrs. Keeble, why it’s only 6:30 p.m. and you are ready for bed.” I say, “Yes I’m ready”. I go to bed because I’m tired. I lay in bed thinking about all of you. ... It is wonderful to know that you, my children are behind me.

With all my love and prayers
Mama Keeble²³¹

²²⁹Laura Keeble, interview by J. E. Choate, 1965, Nashville, tape recording, Marshall Keeble collection, Beaman Library, David Lipscomb University, Nashville.

²³⁰Keeble, “Brother Keeble,” 15.

²³¹Laura Keeble to The Nashville Christian Institute Alumni, *Nashville Christian Institute Reunion*, (Nashville: Souvenir Journal Committee, 2002), 32.

After the death of Marshall Keeble, Laura Keeble never remarried. Laura has enjoyed life with the cherished memory of Marshall, and through the lives of countless individuals she helped to improve through the Nashville Christian Institute.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

NEGRO MEETINGS FOR WHITE PEOPLE

by

Foy E. Wallace Jr.

The manner in which the brethren in some quarters are going in for the negro meetings leads one to wonder whether they are trying to make white folks out of the negroes or negroes out of the white folks. The trend of the general mix-up seems to be toward the latter. Reliable reports have come to me of white women, members of the church, becoming so animated over a certain colored preacher as to go up to him after a sermon and shake hands with him *holding his hand in both of theirs*. That kind of thing will turn the head of most white preachers, and sometimes affect their conduct, and anybody ought to know that it will make fools out of the negroes. For any woman in the church to so far forget her dignity, and lower herself so, just because a negro has learned enough about the gospel to preach it to his race, is pitiable indeed. Her husband should take her in charge unless he has gone crazy, too. In that case somebody ought to take both of them in charge.

Reliable brethren in the Valley have reported the definite inclinations of the negro man and his wife in charge of the orphan home for colored children at Combes toward social equality. They are supposed to be members of the church, and some of the white brethren are apparently encouraging them. It is said that these two negroes have privately stated that they favor social equality and are working for it. The young editor of "Christian Soldier," in the valley, admits that he roomed with the negro preacher, R. N. Hogan, and slept in the same bed with him two nights! And he seemed to be proud of it! Aside from being an infringement on the Jim Crow law, it is a violation of Christianity itself, and of all common decency. Such conduct forfeits the respect of right-thinking people, and would be calculated to stir up demonstrations in most any community if it should become generally known.

It has gained considerable currency that the colored preacher Hogan has been too much inclined to mix with the white people and to favor, in attitude, a social equality. Hogan should have had too much sense, if not self-respect, to have permitted the young white preacher to sleep with him, if the young preacher did not have that much sense or self-respect. But Hogan has been under the sponsorship of Jimmie Lovell and cannot be expected to have any too much sense about anything. I have always said that Marshall Keeble and Luke Miller could not be spoiled, but if I ever hear of them doing anything akin to such as this I will take back every good thing I have ever said of them. Keeble should teach these negro preachers better than that, even if we cannot teach some young upstart among the white preachers. Their practices will degrade the negroes themselves. It is abominable.

When N. B. Hardeman held the valley-wide meeting at Harlingen, Texas, some misguided brethren brought a group of negroes up to the front to be introduced [*sic*] to and shake hands with him. Brother Hardeman told them publicly that he could see all of the colored brethren he cared to see on the outside after services, and that he could say everything to them that he wanted to say without the formality of shaking hands. I think he was right. He told of a prominent brother in the church who went wild over the negroes and showed them such social courtesies that one day one of the negroes asked him if he might marry his daughter. That gave the brother a jolt and he changed his attitude!

In one of my own meetings a young negro preacher was engaged by the church as a janitor. He made it a point to stand out in the vestibule of the church-building to shake hands with the white people. When I insisted that it be discontinued some of the white brethren were offended. Such as this proves that the white brethren are ruining the negroes and defeating the very work that they should be sent to do, that is, preach the gospel to the negroes, their own people.

I saw a letter the other day from the colored preacher, R. N. Hogan, to a certain white brother stating that there were very few negroes in the section where he was preaching at the time, and that he was holding the meeting for the white brethren!

When negro meetings are held in most of the places now, the white brethren over-run the premises. They herald these negro preachers as the greatest preachers in the world, when as a matter of fact if any of the white preachers should say everything they say to a word, it would sound so common that the brethren would stop it. But when a negro says it, in negro manner, the brethren paw up the ground over it.

I was preaching in a certain city where Marshall Keeble had held a successful meeting. In usual style he had poured it on the negroes and it had run on the white people. One brother who was against *hard* preaching went wild over Keeble's hard preaching. Keeble preached it *hard*, calling names and giving the sectarians Hail Columbia! This brother thought it was the greatest stuff he had ever heard. Later, when I was preaching in the same city, he squirmed until he polished the seat of a good pair of trousers because I drew the line on denominationalism. One night while he was squirming, I diverted attention by referring to one of Keeble's *hard* sayings. Immediately this brother sat erect, smiled and nodded in approval of Keeble's *hard* saying. I smiled back at him and said: Get yourself a negro preacher!

I am very much in favor of negro meetings for the negroes, but I am just as much opposed to negro meetings for white people, and I am against white brethren taking the meetings away from the negroes and the general mixing that has become entirely too much of a practice in these negro meetings. Such a thing not only lowers the church in the eyes of the world but it is definitely against the interest of the negroes. If any negro preacher says that this is not true, that will be the evidence that it is *true*, and that he has been spoiled by the white brethren and wants to preach to white audiences. And if any of the white brethren get worked up over what I have said, and want to accuse me of being jealous of the negro preachers, I will just tell them now that I don't even want to hold a meeting for any bunch of

brethren who think that any negro is a better preacher than I am! So that we can just call that argument off before it starts—and the meeting, too.—F. E. W.²³²

²³²Foy E. Wallace, Jr., “Negro Meetings For White People,” *Bible Banner* (March 1941), 7.

APPENDIX B

ENEMIES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

by

R. N. Hogan

"O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" Paul, Acts 13:10. This scathing reprimand was administered by the great apostle Paul to Elymas, the sorcerer, who attempted to turn the deputy from the faith. Now if this man was full of all subtilty, all mischief, a child of the devil and an enemy of all righteousness because he sought to turn this man from the right ways of the Lord, aren't all people the same who are turning others from the right ways of the Lord today? If not, why not? Certainly any man or woman who perverts the right ways of the Lord exposes himself or herself to the wrath of Almighty God. I wonder if my so-called "white" brethren think that they are upholding the right ways of the Lord by barring christian Negroes from being taught the word of God in their churches and so-called christian schools? Is this practice the right ways of the Lord? If not, aren't they guilty of perverting the right ways of the Lord? And if they are perverting the right ways of the Lord, aren't they also full of all subtilty, all mischief, children of the devil and enemies of all righteousness just as was the sorcerer of our text who was reprimanded by the apostle Paul? Yes, I know that I will lose some of my so-called friends because of these articles, but are they really my friends?

According to the Bible, they are God's enemies, and if they are God's enemies, why should I expect them to be my friends? Just a few weeks ago there was a so-called christian College President's meeting conducted out here on the Pacific Coast. According to the information that I received from a very reliable source, these Presidents united in agreement to keep the Negro out of their schools. The schools in California, Oregon, Nebraska, Michigan and Pennsylvania were excepted, but the Presidents of these western and northern schools failed to do as Paul did the sorcerer. They failed to point out the sin of the decision of the Presidents of the other schools. All of these men are highly educated and well informed in regard to what the Bible teaches, but are rebelling against God because of their fear of the people about them.

Please hear me: Just as sure as God rejected King Saul, these men are rejected, if they have ever been accepted. Did these men discuss and agree to refuse admittance into their schools, the Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Italians, Germans, Russians, Koreans, Mexicans, Indians, and etc.? No! Absolutely No! Only the Negro! They hate only the Negro! Do you mean to tell me that these men love God and hate the Negro? Anyone who would take such a stand should read I John 4:19, 20 and 3:15.

Surely these people will not contend that they love the Negro when they refuse him admittance into their schools that are supposed to be christian: where he can get a christian education or be taught the word of God. Every one of these Presidents are supposed to be gospel preachers and on the Board of Directors of each of these so-called christian schools; are men who are supposed to be Elders of the Lord's church and think of it, they are hindering the progress of the church of Christ among the Negro brethren.

Our greatest handicap is the lack of qualified leadership, which these schools are supposed to give to the church. You often hear the cry: "take your time" "don't push this matter too fast!" Well, the Negro has taken his time for a hundred years and I think it is a terrible thing to tell people to take their time in obeying God. Take their time in repenting of their sins. Just as well to tell a man who has been in the Baptist, Methodist or other denominational churches all of his life to take his time in coming out of that human institution.²³³

²³³R. N. Hogan, "Enemies of Righteousness," *Christian Echo* 54 (August 1959), 2.

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