

Book Review/Discussion
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Edward J. Robinson, *Hard Fighting Soldiers: A History of African American Churches of Christ* (Knoxville; University of Tennessee, 2019). Hardcover with 224 pages including Endnotes, Bibliography and Index. ISBN 9781621904908.

In Dr. Edward J. Robinson's latest work *Hard Fighting Soldiers: A History of African American Churches of Christ*, students of the Stone-Campbell movement are provided new and continued insight into the history of African American Churches of Christ. In previous works by the author² focusing on Samuel Robert Cassius, Marshall Keeble, Annie Tuggle, and the history of African American Churches of Christ in the state of Texas, the groundwork was laid upon which *Hard Fighting Soldiers* stands.

Dr. Robinson notes, "Building on what others have done, the present work stands apart as the first academic, full-length study of African American Churches of Christ."³ In this study, he writes that he seeks to go beyond examining the dichotomy of relationships between Keeble and Bowser and to examine lesser known figures like F.F. Carson, whose life served as a conceptual

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² Works by the author include Robinson, Edward J, *To Save My Race from Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007); *To Lift up My Race: The Essential Writings of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); *Show Us How you Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914–1968* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008); *The Fight Is On in Texas: A History of African American Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State, 1865–2000* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008); *I Was under a Heavy Burden: The Life of Annie C. Tuggle* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2011); and *A Godsend to His People: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Marshall Keeble* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008).

³ Edward J. Robinson, *Hard Fighting Soldiers: A History of African American Churches of Christ* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 2019), xxv.

framework of living experienced both by African American preachers and African American Churches of Christ.⁴ His goals are lofty.

The author will not only highlight and document the lives of lesser known figures, but he will seek to clarify understanding of the ways African American Churches of Christ endured chattel slavery, withstood racism, communicated to the masses, educated their people, created unity, and extended their reach beyond the shores of the continental United States. In his own words, Robinson writes, “In short, black believers survived and thrived on the discarded ‘scraps’ of America, forging their own identity, fashioning their own lofty ecclesiology and ‘hard’ theology, and creating their own papers, lectureships, liturgy, and congregations.”⁵

The work commends itself in what it records of the history of African American Churches of Christ. But it cannot accomplish what will require an army of students of African American Church of Christ history. *Hard Fighting Soldier* in years to come will prove to be a history that is built on sectionalism involving southern states where much activity centered on the work and legacy of the spiritual descendants of Cassius, Bowser and Keeble. It will serve as a good beginning and extensive outline that itself will need to be improved upon to include more intensive and inclusive work in other southern states. as well as studies focused on the development of African American Churches of Christ above the Mason Dixon line.

Evident strengths in the present annotated outline include Dr. Robinson’s alignment of theological beliefs among African American preachers with the exclusivist theology of white Churches of Christ, an exclusivism that permeated the preaching of black preachers in the form of a “hard theology.” The reader is further informed by Dr. Robinson’s willingness to survey the importance of African American women among African American Churches of Christ. Still

⁴ Ibid., xxvi.

⁵ Ibid., xxii.

further, subjects exploring the work of African American Churches of Christ include responses to racism, the development of periodicals, the formation of lectureships, the establishment of schools and colleges (as well as preacher training schools), the importance of hymnody, involvement in missionary enterprises, and a documentation of threatening crises among a new generation of preachers.

In addressing where this work will lead beyond this initial presentation of an academic full length study of African American Churches of Christ, I present three areas of study that have some affinity with the presentations of *Hard Fighting Soldiers*, but go beyond it to identify people and entities that helped shape African American Churches of Christ in the twentieth century.

Dr. Robinson has noted that the National Lectureship resulted from the interest African American leaders had in maintaining unity, presenting doctrine, encouraging preachers, and providing an opportunity for fellowship across the brotherhood.⁶ This was a dream of African American preachers in the first half of the twentieth century. What should be considered is that in the second half of the twentieth century, African American church leaders made another conscious effort to maintain unity, not just on the national level, but on regional and state levels as well.

Regional lectureships provided opportunity for scores of less traveled preachers to grow under the tutelage of more well-traveled national preachers, to have an opportunity to take the stage in the same way others did at national events, and to involve members who might not travel the distance of the national events. Beginning in the early 1970s and continuing into the early 1980s regional and state lectureships formed.

⁶ Ibid., 81.

One of the oldest regional lectureship is the Southeastern Lectureship. In 1974, James Kennedy of the I-85 Church of Christ in Greenville, SC hosted several well-known preachers from the Southeast. These included Andrew Hairston of Atlanta, GA, Frank McElveen of Charleston, SC; Ivory Hunter of Ashville, NC; Zebedee Moore of Valdosta, GA; and Lee Guthrie of Georgetown, AL. Together they formed a board that would be responsible for governing the Southeast Lectureship in varying southeastern states each October. Dr. Andrew Hairston was appointed its first coordinator and serves as board Chairman to this day.

In the Midwest, what was at first formed as the Tri-State Lectureship in 1976 became the Midwest Lectureship. Among the initial preachers forming the lectureship were William Baker of Louisville, KY; Samuel Jordan of Chicago, IL; Ralph Smith of East St. Louis, IL; David Perkins of Indianapolis, IN, and Mayo Towels of Decatur, IL. This lectureship engaged. brothers and sisters in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Michigan. Each of these preachers forming this lectureship held significant influence in their region and in African American Churches of Christ, from coast to coast.

On the Gulf Coast, another leading figure, a co-author of the work, *Black Preachers of Today: Churches of Christ*,⁷ Carl E. Gaines, organized the Gulf Coast Lectureship in 1976. This lectureship served churches in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, and Texas. Through the years, both regional and national preachers have engaged with attendees throughout the Gulf coast region further fostering a sense of unity among African American Churches of Christ.

In the Northeast, Dr. R. C. Wells, formed the Northeastern Lectureship, beginning talks in 1983. Churches from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut

⁷ Carl E. Gaines and John C. Whitley, *Black Preachers of Today: Churches of Christ* vol. 1 (compiled and edited by the authors, 1974).

and Massachusetts would come together to study bible teachings, encourage unity, foster fellowship and envision strengthening the local church.

Many of the men forming these regional lectureship enjoyed ministries that covered over fifty years at one congregation and within their regions.⁸ This allowed them to shape and to develop unity, address doctrinal concerns, provide platforms for growth and development, and envision a future vibrancy for the churches within their regions and the national brotherhood.

Dr. Robinson highlighted the work of Annie Tuggle and Mary Carpenter as examples of the contributions of women to the growth and development of African American Churches.⁹ We should recognize that among African American Churches of Christ, the women formed their own lectureship in 1985. Their first meeting was held in Atlanta, Georgia in 1986. Mattie Blackstone and sister Winnie Wright of the Spring Lake Church of Christ in Spring Lake, North Carolina were the leaders of this lectureship for its first five years. Brother Paul Mason became minister of the congregation in 1990 and appointed his wife, Betty Mason, to serve as director. She served in this role for twenty-two years. Paul Mason was a student and preacher brought up under the tutelage of J. S. Winston. He ministered to churches in Cleveland, Ohio, and Hobbs, New Mexico before eventually settling in the Fayetteville area in North Carolina. Sister Elsie Gilliam is the Country Club Drive congregation (formerly Spring Lake) now serves as the director, an appointment she received in July 2012. The ladies' lectureship rivals the National Lectureship of African American Churches of Christ in attendance. In recent years, they have been drawing thousands as they too move from state to state bringing together women from throughout the

⁸ In the southeast, Frank McElveen, James Kennedy and Andrew Hairston served their respective congregations over fifty years.

⁹ Robinson, *Hard Fighting Soldiers*, 119.

country. These regional lectureships, and in the case of the women, a national lectureship, are but one example of necessary consideration for understanding a history of identity shaping, unity emphasizing, and doctrinal soundness efforts of African American Churches of Christ.

Dr. Robinson underscored the importance of the formation of the “Christian Echo” under G. P. Bowser.¹⁰ The paper served a purpose similar to that of the National Lectureship of African American Churches of Christ. It gave opportunity to address local and national doctrine concerns, encourage support of church events, solicit support for missions and to be a vehicle for African American Churches of Christ to communicate to the brotherhood at large.

What would certainly enhance understanding of African American periodical activity would be to include another paper circulated among African American Churches of Christ. A periodical that supplanted the Christian Echo in the closing decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty- first century. The paper is known as “The Revivalist,” created and published by Dr. Herman Wesley III.

Herman Wesley grew up under the tutelage and encouragement of Dr. Eugene Lawton in Newark, New Jersey. This factor provides explanation for brother Wesley’s interest in impacting the brotherhood nationally. Dr. Wesley attended SWCC (1979-1981) the school where Dr. Eugene Lawton once served as academic dean. After graduation he attended Oklahoma Christian University. He started publishing “The Revivalist in 1989” in Denton, Texas. The first publication focused on the death of a leading evangelist among African American Churches of Christ, Evangelist A. C. Christman. With the support of many influential preachers throughout the brotherhood, the paper grew to a circulation of nearly ten thousand each quarter, servicing

¹⁰ Ibid., 73–77.

two hundred churches. African American members of Churches of Christ were reading this publication as opposed to the “Christian Echo.”

There is yet another observation related to the enormous task involved in presenting a significant history of African American Churches of Christ. While it is true that there is a comparative paucity of materials related to many people and events involving African American Churches of Christ, there is at the same time a wealth of documentation yet to be explored and added to publications of historical works like that of *Hard Fighting Solider*. And while Dr. Robinson has highlighted history involving churches throughout Texas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma, California, and to a lesser extent, some midwestern, northern, northwestern and eastern states, there is a treasure trove of works on preachers and by preachers and their work yet to be brought together in volumes receiving wide circulation. Influential, nationally known preachers absent from *Hard Fighting Soldiers* started and ran schools, attended NCI, conducted tent meetings, held debates, influenced men like Dr. W.F. Washington, and contributed to a national body of work that serves African American Churches of Christ today.

One example of a preacher impacting the brotherhood as a whole, but whose work is seldom credited, is brother Quincy Carter who served churches throughout the brotherhood for thirty-four years, his last seventeen of those years in North Carolina.¹¹ In North Carolina he served the Belmont Church of Christ in Statesville and the Smith Street Church of Christ in Kannapolis. In addition, he worked with Churches of Christ in Cleveland, Salisbury, Newton and Capernaum, NC. His circle of preaching friends included Marshall Keeble, under whom he attended NCI, Chester Vaughn, Dennis Glover, G.P. Bowser, Paul English, K.K. Mitchell, Busby

¹¹ Mary L. Carter, *The Life and Legacy of Quincy C. Carter, Oct. 17, 1917–July 16, 1967* (publisher not named, 2016).

and James Cooper. His “Great Debate” of 1957 with Bishop Johnson of the Apostolic faith was studied by men like Dr. W. F. Washington for his debate with men of the same denomination. But a great impact, probably unknown by many, was the result of a poem he crafted before his death in 1967. The poem begins with the words, “The Church of Christ is true to Name.” Fifty-six years after Quincy Carter’s death, the poem is still being quoted.

In the last National Crusade for Christ (2019) hosted by African American Churches of Christ in the Fort Worth, TX area, one of the speakers, Jerry Houston, quoted this poem which has been quoted by hundreds of African American preachers over the last sixty plus years. It has been heard by tens of thousands within the fellowship. The poem is in full alignment with the “hard theology” and exclusivism Dr. Robinson documents in his work. It is evidence as well of the creative genius, theology shaping, and enduring work of African American preachers, some just recently being recognized, who guided and nurtured African American Churches of Christ in the first half of the twentieth century. It reads,

The Church of Christ is true to name
The fruit it bears is just the same
No human creed to lead astray
For Jesus says, “I am the Way.”
Man say this way cannot be true
Because its members are so few,
But in the type of the church today
There were but eight in the righteous way
When the earth’s Savior came,
Salvation was promised though His name
To all who obey and travel the narrow way.
There are five hundred ways they say
And each one is the narrow way
But if the truth you could obtain,
Just ask from what source they came
The works of man are all in vain
For they are standing on a plain.
The storms of life they will not stand
Because they are founded on the sand.
In the holy land where Jesus trod,
He was confessed to be the Son of God.
On this rock so firmly stands

The House of God not made with hands.
The first at judgment robed in white
Will be ready for mansions fair and bright.
To you who have been faithful and so true,
Crowns of glory are waiting for you
The self-righteous came to the throne
But the great number they would not own.
They said they had done many noble deeds,
Bu their lives were governed by human creeds.
The sinner came on judgment day
Who had not followed the blood-stained way,
So if the holy way you fail to know
Then to outer darkness you must go!¹²

The present observation does not allow for extended observation of the work of Quincy C. Carter, but it makes this observation, there are many more persons and their stories to be understood related to the history of African American Churches of Christ.

¹² Carter, *The Life and Legacy of Quincy C. Carter, Oct. 17, 1917–July, 69–70.*