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Edward J. Robinson. *To Pave the Way for His People: A Life of Preston Taylor*. St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2024. 178 Pages.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM L. LEE¹

Edward J. Robinson sums up what motivated him to write *To Pave the Way for His People: A Life of Preston Taylor* in his prologue. Robinson writes concerning Preston Taylor, “He was arguably one of the most prominent African American leaders in the Progressive Era and was unquestionably the most visible and influential black man in the Stone-Campbell movement from Reconstruction to the Great Depression. Yet regrettably, his story has been buried beneath the sand dunes of history. This work seeks, therefore, to rescue Preston Taylor from historical obscurity and place him on the pedestal of acclaim, with all his successes, faults, and failures.” In the opinion of this reviewer, Dr. Edward J Robinson has more than succeeded in exhuming and rescuing Preston Taylor from historical obscurity.

In his prologue, Dr. Robinson sets the stage for the reader to “stay woke” throughout the reading of this book. He begins with the story of the 1892 fire in Nashville that claimed the lives of three black firemen and Preston Taylor’s involvement. The classy, lovingly, and empathetic way that Taylor the preacher/pastor/mortician handled that tragedy begins the journey of unearthing his hidden years. The funeral of these three may have made Preston Taylor the precursor to the Black Lives Matter Movement, recognizing his commitment to ensure that their bodies were carefully cared for into death and that their lives were remembered properly.

In exhuming Preston Taylor, Robinson organizes the chapters in the book chronologically and begins each chapter with some historical context. The historical context helps the reader understand what was happening in the world, the country, Nashville, Kentucky, or the church as Preston Taylor practiced ministry and exercised his entrepreneurial genius. Taylor was born a mulatto slave. Given this as his starting

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point, Taylor could rightly be described as a renaissance man by the way he learned to navigate and negotiate the world in his time.

Robinson makes a compelling case in part two of the book that Preston Taylor was first and foremost a preacher/prophet/pastor. He does not diminish his prowess as a businessman, funeral director, stockholder in a local bank, philanthropist, or entrepreneur. Preston Taylor's passion was the church. This is substantiated by the much celebrated and iconic Booker T. Washington, who lauded Taylor in the book with these words, "He has interested himself along other lines; but not for a single year since arriving at maturity has he neglected what he regarded as his highest calling." The unearthing of Taylor's "highest calling" is a timely discovery for ministers today in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in general and for African American ministers in particular. There is an ongoing conversation today as to how to describe ministers who serve churches that are not able to fully fund their ministries. The terms "part-time minister" and "bi-vocational minister" are the most prominent nomenclature for ministers today who are employed elsewhere while pastoring a local church. For many, this nomenclature suggests that they are less than their counterparts who have full-time ministry stature. Preston Taylor, the central figure of this book, would not describe himself as a part-time minister nor bi-vocational. I think the term he would use would be "Entrepreneurial Minister." I think this descriptor would better serve and elevate the stature of Disciples pastors, who like Taylor are true to their "higher calling" but need to supplement their income with other employment. African American Disciples pastors have seen themselves historically modeling Preston Taylor as "entrepreneurial ministers."

In the chapter, "His Highest Calling," we discover how Preston Taylor used the power of the pen to become a household name according to the author. Taylor became editor of "Our Colored Brethren," a column in the *Christian Standard* which had a readership of more than 50,000. It was through this column that the larger church was afforded a window into "the congregational activity and theological formation of African American Disciples of Christ." The column also served as a platform for Taylor to weigh in on the issues of the times, especially his theology, the role of women, polity, and philosophy of the church. Taylor literally became the voice of and for African American Disciples.

In chapter four, "Holding on to Jesus," Robinson gleans from Taylor's "Our Colored Brethren" column his view of African American women in church life. He writes, "the polity and theology of Taylor was inclusive in that he made ample room for the presence and participation of African American women in the Disciples of Christ." We are not told what presence and participation means here. We know that Taylor was a shrewd businessman, so I wonder how much Taylor was influenced to make "ample room" for them because of the ability of women to raise money and to organize.

In exhuming Taylor, the author does not shield the reader from his flaws and failures. Taylor was a driven man who was busy all the time. He was married four times, two

ending in divorce and the third by death of “a broken heart.” The wife who died of “a broken heart” was Georgia. Her friends believed she died due to the double loss of an infant child and Preston Taylor falling in love with a younger woman. Robinson admits he cannot substantiate the cause of Taylor’s failed marriages, but he simply leaves the reader with some questions to ponder at the end of chapter eight.

I have suggested that Preston Taylor may have been the precursor to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Greenwood Park, “a resting place and breathing place for blacks,” was another effort by Taylor to accentuate that black lives matter. Amid a segregated South that denied blacks access to public parks, Taylor built Greenwood Park to offer social, emotional, physical, and moral uplift to blacks according to Robinson. Preston Taylor paved the way for his people because he believed that black lives matter.