The Pierces: Father and Son

by William R. Cannon*

When I came to teach at what was then Emory-at-Oxford, and to serve as pastor of the Allen Memorial Methodist Church, in 1942—thirty-five years ago—there were no professorships whatever on this campus. The highest rank that a teacher might attain was that of associate professor, and most of my colleagues were merely either instructors or associate professors. Even the dean, technically speaking, was not really the dean, for he was directly answerable to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of Emory University. This relationship, I must confess, existed at that time more in the breach than in the observance, for Dean George Roach, our brilliant and imperious leader, was in reality answerable to nobody but God himself. Evidently, the dean at “Big” Emory realized this, for he never dared to countermand his orders, lest by chance he might countermand God’s as well. Except for Bishop Arthur J. Moore, I never knew a man more in command of the situation than was Dean George Roach. But the rest of the faculty had to find satisfaction and happiness in one of two ways: either they dreamed of being translated to “Big” Emory—where, by publication and great teaching, they might someday obtain a professorship—or they resigned themselves to life here, with the associate professorship as the highest possible level of academic attainment. I, personally, took the former route; but persons greater and better, and more dedicated than I, chose to give themselves unreservedly to the pupils at Oxford; and their names and fame form the glory of this institution. Among my own colleagues, there were Brown and Dickey, Carleton and Ellington, Whatley and Jackson, the inimitable Walter Strozier, who was mayor of the town as well, and both Dean Roach and his able successor, Virgil Young Cook Eady. There were also others, such as Thorn, Osterman, Clarke, and Watkins; but they, like me, accepted positions elsewhere and cannot be placed among the aforenamed persons who persevered in faithful service to the glory of Oxford and the greatness of this institution, whose graduates now rise up to call them blessed.

*Bishop Cannon presented this paper at the establishment of the Pierce Chair in Religion at Oxford College of Emory University.
But now the situation at this college is entirely different. Academic advancement here is comparable to such advancement anywhere else. The name itself signifies the change. This is no longer Emory-at-Oxford, a mere adjunct to the Atlanta campus. This is Oxford College, a unit of Emory University, comparable in every way to the junior division of Emory College on the Atlanta campus. We have here our own dean; and there are full professors, with tenure and all other rights and privileges appertaining thereunto. Today, we witness the establishment of a named professorship that will, within a period of time, become a fully-endowed professorship. The person who provided for this signal accomplishment in the life of this school is a descendent of the illustrious persons for whom the chair is named and in grateful memory of whom it exists. I have called it a chair. Perhaps "settee," or at least "love-seat," would be a more appropriate designation, since this is to be the Lovick and George Foster Pierce Professorship, named for two eminent Georgia clergymen and Methodist divines—father and son, the great Lovick Pierce and his even greater son, George Foster Pierce.

The donor, Mr. Abbot Turner, a lifelong and devoted Methodist layman, a member of Saint Luke United Methodist Church in Columbus, Georgia, is the grandson of Colonel and Mrs. Thomas Turner, who resided all their lives at Sparta, Georgia, which is the home of the Pierce family. Mrs. Thomas Turner was the former Ella Pierce, the eldest child of George and Ann Pierce, so that Bishop Pierce was his great-grandfather. Brother Abbot, however, did not know either of them, since they both were dead and buried before he was born. The greatest bishop he ever knew was Bishop Arthur J. Moore, in whose honor he gave the Arthur J. Moore Chair of Evangelism, in the Candler School of Theology, while Bishop Moore was still alive. It would be difficult for Brother Abbot to think of any other clergyman as Bishop Moore's equal; but it should give him satisfaction now to realize that his own ancestor, Bishop Pierce, was of the same caliber as Bishop Moore, and vies with him for first place among the very greatest religious leaders that Georgia ever produced. As our then Governor Jimmy Carter, now President of the United States, paid tribute to the memory of Bishop Moore, by hanging his portrait in the State Capitol, so Governor Albert Holt Colquitt paid tribute to the memory of Bishop Pierce, whose preaching had inspired him as a youth and whose moral leadership to Georgia he
had witnessed during those trying days that followed the War Between the States.

Lovick Pierce, the father, had a stronger constitution than George, his son—or, at least, he knew better how to take care of himself—for he lived to be ninety-four years old, while the bishop died when he was seventy-three. As a matter of fact, the two men died within five years of one another—the father preceding the son, but with just enough time to prepare a place for him in heaven, as he had always done so loyally and faithfully here on earth.

Lovick gave way to his boy very early in elections in the Georgia Conference for delegates to General Conference, and he moved graciously aside so that his own strength might not compromise that of his son in the election to the episcopacy. He got his greatest satisfaction in life, not through the achievements he himself wrought in his own ecclesiastical career, significant as they were, but in the reflected light of his son’s shining eminence. He beamed with pride whenever his son spoke, and the greatest compliment it was possible for anyone to pay him was to present him as the father of Bishop George Foster Pierce. The son, in turn, referred to him as “my venerable father.” Lovick Pierce lived to be the oldest active Methodist preacher in the whole world, and continued to command a seat in the Georgia delegation to the General Conference almost to the end, for he was there talking and voting when he was in his late eighties. Indeed, after George was elected bishop and could no longer serve as a delegate to the General Conference, over which he took his place as a presiding officer along with his colleagues, the old man was able to resume his place as head of the Georgia delegation, for all the preachers delighted to vote for him, so great was their confidence in him.

The old gentleman—contrary to what one might expect—belonged to the liberal wing of the church, and generally supported progressive measures, such as lay representatives to General Conference and longer pastorates for ministers in a given local church. The son, by contrast, was a staunch conservative; he opposed virtually every change that was ever suggested in the economy of the church. The father was a theologian, and delighted in discussing doctrinal issues in minute detail. The son was impatient with such exactness; he was concerned always with the practical, everyday affairs of the church—what one could see tangibly in the way of accomplishments and success. The Bishop
was annoyed with those who were always arguing with the structure and polity of the church. He felt more comfortable with the old and familiar. He was skeptical of the new. The burden of proof, in his mind, always rested on those who proposed change. How could they be sure that what they proposed would be an improvement on what the church already was?

Lovick Pierce lived through almost the whole of Methodist history, from the inception of the church on this continent, in the late eighteenth century, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when he died. Indeed, his active ministry lasted nearly seventy-five years. The son’s ministry—though long, according to our standards, with mandatory retirement at seventy, and voluntary retirement as low as sixty-two years of age—was only fifty years. “When Dr. Lovick Pierce began,” wrote Dr. Atticus G. Haygood, “most of Georgia was inhabited by Indians, and Methodism in America was represented by a few feeble conferences, for the most part hugging the Atlantic Coast. When he fell on sleep, Methodism was rooted and grounded almost round the world; it had spread nearly over the North American continent, the great movement in Mexico and Central America beginning during his last years among us.”

Lovick Pierce was born on March 24, 1785, in Halifax County, North Carolina, just three months after the Christmas Conference of 1784, in Baltimore, when the Methodist Church was organized. He had a brother, Reddick Pierce, who was two years older than he. There were no schools in that part of the country. Books were scarce. Newspapers for them were non-existent, so they got an education as best they could by listening to their betters and observing life in whatever form they found it. Both boys were experts in the use of guns. None of the family was a member of a church, and all of them, because of the evangelistic preaching of an itinerant, Jimmy Jenkins, were converted at about the same time. Since Jenkins was a Methodist, the Pierce family joined the Methodist Church. Both Reddick and Lovick felt the call to preach, and from the outset gave their lives to the ministry.

Lovick abandoned his vocation temporarily, however, because of the needs of his family, especially the need of his children for an education. He married Ann Foster, the daughter of a large plantation owner who resided near Greensboro, Georgia. Lovick never made his wife live in parsonages, or even itinerate with him. When George was born, he settled mother and child with
her parents on the plantation, while he went back and forth to the churches to which he was assigned. As other children were born, he saw that he could not educate them on a Methodist minister’s salary. He was determined that they would have more than that which the penury of his own family had afforded him. So he took voluntary location and entered medical school in the East, where he obtained the M.D. degree. He practiced medicine in Greensboro until he had accumulated an estate large enough to provide him with the resources to educate his children. When he felt that he had enough, he resumed his place in the itinerant ministry and never practiced medicine again. This was when George was in his late teens, just ready to enter Franklin College in Athens, which became the University of Georgia. Oddly enough, the father was assigned as pastor of the Methodist Church in Athens.

George spent his formative years on the plantation of his maternal grandfather. When he entered the University of Georgia, he was tall and prepossessing, though extremely thin. He was almost six feet tall, a great height at that time, but he weighed only 140 pounds. Yet, his features were perfectly formed, and he was considered extremely good looking. He gave himself assiduously to his studies and finished third in his class. A boy who later became a Baptist minister and the first president of Mercer University was the first honor graduate. He and George were close friends. Likewise, George became intimate with Bob Toombs, whom he always admired and loved. The relationship was reciprocal, for Bob Toombs always had the highest respect for and devotion to George Pierce. After George finished college, he tried his hand at numerous occupations, including even the practice of law; but being a dismal failure at all of these, he took up the ministry. Really, he was under conviction that he should preach, and for that reason he could not think constructively about anything else.

Whereas George’s father had married into one of the influential and affluent families of the state, George was determined that he would not repeat the same performance. He had a horror of being dependent in any way on his wife or his wife’s people. He wanted a wife who would be altogether dependent on him. I guess he never understood his mother’s living so long with her parents, with his spending his own childhood in his grandfather’s home, and with his own father having to come, when
he could spare the time, to see his mother, and her seldom, if ever, going to be with him. Perhaps he felt that something was wrong with his father’s having to locate and rear the family outside the itineracy in a fine house purchased in his capacity as doctor of medicine in the village of Greensboro, just seven or eight miles from his grandfather’s farm. George believed that when a man accepted the call to preach, he should devote full time to it. Nothing—neither family responsibility, nor desires of the wife, nor needs of the children—should impair in any way his service to God and his duty to the church and the people to whom he had been appointed. He wrote of himself: “I was poor and proud and independent, and was firmly resolved that I would never wed a wealthy girl. I was afraid that she might, in some of the irritations of life, taunt me with the fact that I was living on her money, that she supported me, had lifted me from the ashes and given me position in the world. Anything like this from the lips of the woman I loved, I felt would be an immedicable wound. I did not mean to risk it. I intended my wife should depend on me, and that we would rise or sink together.”

George Pierce was a male chauvinist from start to finish. As a bishop, and also as a civic leader in Georgia, he opposed suffrage for women, and was alarmed at the prospect that they should ever be given the vote. As late as 1884, the year he died, he spoke out against women being given the vote. He had no taste whatever for what he considered masculinity in a woman. He despised those women who sought the platform and claimed the vote. He said, in ardent and the enthusiastic heat of conviction, that he prayed God would hide his head under the sod ere that day should come. And God honored his request: he died, in fact, in the very year that he registered publicly this request.

George had difficulty getting his license to preach and being admitted on trial in the Georgia Conference. His father had given him a handsome blue broadcloth, brass-buttoned coat for his graduation, which he proudly wore to church on Sunday and to all other occasions which required him to be dressed-up. Such clothing was considered worldly by some, especially by his own pastor, Brother John Collingsworth. Collingsworth demanded that he get rid of it, and dress more soberly. When he refused, on the grounds that his father could not afford to buy another, the pastor opposed his being granted the license to preach, and even spoke out on the floor of the quarterly conference against his
admission. But, fortunately, the judgment of the body as a whole was better than that of this eccentric individual, and George was admitted—though not unanimously, as is generally the case.

He was considered the most handsome preacher in Methodism, and one of the most charming and prepossessing young men in the entire nation. His speaking ability was extraordinary. Not only in appearance was he “like a God, in aspect so divine,” but his voice was as the voice of many waters—deep, rich, resonant, clear, and distinct. It was so powerful that he always preferred to preach out-of-doors. He said that the open fields gave his voice more room. Consequently, his rise in the church was swift and meteoric. He never stayed in any local pastorate more than two years; and three years was the length of his service on a district at any one time. He held the best and strongest churches; and, since there were so few of them, he held Saint John, Augusta, twice—three times, if you count his time there as junior pastor under Dr. James O. Andrew. Andrew was elected to the episcopacy from the pastorate of Saint John, while Pierce was his junior pastor. Likewise, he served twice as presiding elder on the Augusta district, and this district was considered the best in the conference, though Savannah, perhaps, had more prestige, since it was the only district that could claim the services of Mr. Wesley, though he was not a Methodist when he was in Georgia. George Pierce served both Saint John, as pastor, and the Augusta district, as presiding elder, while he was still in his twenties.

Indeed, at twenty-eight years of age, he became the first president of Wesleyan Female College in Macon, the oldest female college in the world. This young man was its chief architect. He gave it its first curriculum and helped mold its character. As president, he and his family lived in the dormitory and made a home for the college girls. At the same time, he did practically all the preaching at Mulberry Methodist Church in Macon, reducing the pastor there to the status of “paid visitor.” He also did most of the preaching in chapel, and held the chair of moral philosophy. Whatever else the students may have gotten out of college, they got a full dose of George F. Pierce.

While there, he bought up the best acreage in Vineville. If he had held on to it, he would have made a fortune; but he sold it when he left Macon, believing that a pastor should not have worldly interests that might call him away from his pastorate. He was elected a delegate to the General Conference during those two
Wesleyan years, a phenomenal accomplishment for one under thirty years of age. Four years later, at age thirty-three, he headed the Georgia delegation to the New York General Conference, the session that saw the separation of the Southern branch of the church from the Northern, an event that led to the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Indeed, George F. Pierce was one of the principal speakers in the debate over Bishop Andrew. He defended him without reservation in his ownership of slaves, for, as a matter of fact, Pierce owned slaves, too. “As far as we are concerned,” he said, “the greatest blessing that could befall us would be a division of this union. There, sir, at the South, we dwell in peace, and the Good Shepherd watches the flock and guards us from all harm.”

He served as pastor of Saint Luke, Columbus, Georgia, where his descendents, the Turners, are all members. And from that pastorate he went to the presidency of Emory College, here, at Oxford. He was the third president of this institution, serving it from 1849 until his election to the episcopacy in 1854. His time of five years at Emory was the longest he ever spent in any position prior to his becoming a bishop, for Pierce believed in short pastorates—of no more than one or two years. His strength was in the pulpit. He was a poor pastor. House-to-house visitation bored him. He found the conversation of most people inane; yet, his preaching was such that he could easily command a congregation on Sunday morning of 1,500 people.

Bishop Pierce’s episcopal ministry lasted from 1854 to 1884, a period of thirty years. During all that time, he resided on a farm called “Sunshine,” near Sparta, Georgia. He was not the resident bishop of the state, however, as I am. In that day, bishops were free to reside wherever they pleased, though they held conferences anywhere throughout the connection. The college of bishops would meet and parcel out the work among its members on a yearly basis, so that the bishops rotated their services, seldom holding the same conference two years in succession. In that way, a bishop sooner or later held every conference in the church and appointed every minister in the connection to a church. The bishops were general superintendents; they knew everybody, and every station and circuit. (It would be more accurate to say they knew “about”—for I doubt that they really “knew,” since most of their information was what they gained from others.)

Bishop Pierce would stay at home and farm during the spring
and summer. But when fall came, he started on his round of
conferences, which would occupy him till just before Christmas,
when he would return for the holidays with the family, and remain
until after his birthday, on February 3. He would begin a round
with another set of conferences or engagements over the
connection at large. These would keep him on the road until
spring—late spring, perhaps—sometimes early summer.

Travel in those days was very difficult. Generally, it was by
stagecoach or riverboat, sometimes by horse and buggy. The
bishop would frequently arrive late for a conference—sometimes
as late as one or two days, because of the exigencies of travel. But
the delegates were faithful: they would just sit and await his
arrival.

Bishop Pierce was the first bishop of the old Southern church
to cross the continental United States by land. His predecessors,
both Bishop Soule and Bishop Andrew, had gone to California by
ship; but Pierce, in 1859, made it both ways by land, holding
conferences in Texas as a part of his episcopal duty in the course of
the journey. On this extremely arduous trip, he carried his wife
and his youngest daughter, Ann—then only a small child, probably
eight or nine years old. The travel by stage was twenty-two days.
What food they got on the way after leaving San Antonio was at the
various points where the stage changed horses. It consisted mainly
of bread and Mexican beans. In the unbearably hot weather the
food was covered with flies, and the bishop had to close his eyes to
eat it. It was so bad at places that he and Mrs. Pierce would fast for
days at a time. The little girl, however, had to have something. At
one stagecoach stop, Bishop Pierce asked an old man who sold
victuals what he would charge for a slice of bread for the child. He
answered, "I reckon a dollar is fair." So that little Ann might eat,
the bishop paid the dollar; but he gave the old fellow a lecture on
honesty. It was on this same trip that the Pierces were entertained
at one of the army installations by a young lieutenant and his wife
by the name of William T. Sherman. Bishop Pierce is lavish in his
praise of this charming, gracious, hospitable, and kind couple in
the report he published of his journey in the "Southern Christian
Advocate." This report was quite different from his assessment of
General Sherman just a few years later, when on that infamous
march through Georgia the bishop thanked God that he was not
required to repay the Yankee's hospitality at his own home at
Sunshine.
Bishop Pierce, though never a Democrat, and favorable to the Union before the War Between the States, was an ardent Southerner, as loyal to the state of Georgia as Lee was to Virginia. His only son, Lovick, fought and was wounded in the conflict. The bishop's patriotism impaired his judgment. At first, he could not believe that the North would ever go to arms with the South over secession. And, once the war was on, he interpreted every military event as favorable to the Southern cause, whether it was or not. The old doctor, his father, was far more realistic, and early predicted the unhappy outcome of the struggle for the South. The letters of the two men to son Lovick are most revealing.

Bishop Pierce was not infallible, though at times he appeared as if he thought he were, and that he expected the public to accept his opinions and advice as such. This may be a vocational weakness of the episcopacy. Most bishops that I have known convey this impression. For example, toward the end of the War, in his correspondence with his son, the bishop confided his wish that he might take over as President of the Confederacy, at least long enough to win the war. He said that he had the sense that Jefferson Davis lacked, and could guarantee victory, if the generals would follow his directions in one or two battles. He felt that he could easily have defeated Sherman and routed his whole army at the Battle of Atlanta. Jefferson Davis, unfortunately, had not had the wisdom to consult him even one time during his entire stay in office, whereas Abraham Lincoln had constantly sought the guidance and godly admonition of his Northern counterpart, Bishop Simpson.

Bishop Pierce was never modest about giving advice. He had strong convictions and he was not reluctant to express them. Though he loved and supported Emory College, and kept it affluent after the War, by winning the confidence of Northern financiers—like Seney, for whom Seney Hall is named—he vigorously opposed the establishment by the church of Vanderbilt University, and he was perhaps the strongest opponent of theological schools in the entire nation. He wrote: "I cannot conscientiously help found the work of providing a theological school, and I therefore feel obliged to hinder it, if I can fairly. I am against it—head and heart, tongue and pen—now and forever, one and indivisible. I pray most sincerely that the theological scheme may go down to the shades of oblivion. . . . With the Bible and the Discipline in my hands, I trained myself, as any honest, earnes
young man can do and will do. . . . I never felt the need of any other training. . . . The professor himself . . . never traveled a circuit or conducted a revival and knows as little of an itinerant's life and duty as those book men who, in counsel with their own tastes and attitudes, advise my colleagues of the work of the church! Such training will mar but never make a preacher!"

I, for one, am glad that Mr. Abbot Turner does not hold the same opinion as his ancestor; for, if he did, we would not have the Arthur J. Moore Chair of Evangelism today. But we would have the Pierce Chair of Religion, for Bishop Pierce advocated the teaching of religion in every liberal-arts college, as essential to a well-rounded education. He wished the preachers to have the same education as the laity, so that there would be understanding and rapport between them. Indeed, he would have founded a chair of evangelism—but in a college, not in a seminary or graduate school. He wrote: "My observation is that very scholarly men, deeply devoted to classroom instruction, are the poorest judges of fitness, and the least capable of adaptation. This training of a man for a special class . . . is a positive disqualification for the general work of the ministry. . . . Give me the evangelist and the revival [ist] rather than the erudite brother who goes into the pulpit to reconcile man with modern science instead of preaching repentance and faith. . . . I do think breaking the heart with the hammer of the Word is better employment than splitting hairs with metaphysical acumen. I do think evangelistic sermons are better than critical lectures."

Bishop Pierce's basic principles were right, though his ideas about the methods of supporting them were altogether inadequate. Theological schools have proved a blessing, not a bane, to the church; yet, their work must be carefully reviewed, assessed, and even corrected by the church. They are her children, not her orphans. They are a part of her organism, not independent entities. Therefore, they must be judged carefully by their results. If their products are effective ministers, who cause the church to grow and expand, their work is satisfactory; if their products are inadequate, so that the church is weakened, then their programs of education and their faculties must be changed. The schools themselves are essential. What is there else to take their place?

Bishop Pierce was a conservative. He opposed any and every change. "I am a Hardshell Methodist," he wrote, "just foolish enough to believe our economy is the wisest, best, most effective
the world ever saw, and exceeding jealous of all tinkering with it.” The progressives in the church always felt that he stood in their way.

If he was an obstacle to progress, what was Bishop George Foster Pierce’s essential greatness? What gave him in his day the distinction of being one of the greatest divines in America?

In matters of policy, it was simply this: Iconoclasm is far less constructive than conservatism. Bishop Pierce was absolutely right in his assessment that there was more good in the Methodist heritage than in the new ideas of his colleagues who offered substitutes for it. What was needed was not to destroy the past, but merely to graft onto it the best from the present. Evolutionary continuity is far more salutory than revolutionary ecclesiastical change. This, Bishop Pierce’s work secured. The church did progress; yet, at the same time, she conserved her heritage, keeping the best out of the past, and was, as a result, herself—not some strange, unrecognizable substitute. There is always more good in the accumulation of the ages than there is in any revolutionary creation that just one era of time can generate. It is sad—even disastrous—when we lose all our memories.

Bishop Pierce’s greatest contribution was his influence. To be sure, he was not infallible. He became a great moral force and spiritual power in the post-war South. He was recognized, known, respected, and loved everywhere. The train stopped at his farm at “Sunshine” just on sight of him standing by the railroad track with his valise, for he must not be inconvenienced by having to go to Sparta to the station. Indeed, conductors were ordered to stop the train when the Bishop requested, to let him off for an appointment. It might be in the middle of a farm or atop a mountain. He rode free on passes all over the nation. The President of the United States and his whole family came out to hear him preach when he dedicated Mount Vernon Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Washington, D. C.

He averaged preaching a sermon a day, and was considered the most eloquent preacher in America. He developed serious throat trouble, so serious that he could at times scarcely swallow his food. But he went right on. For almost a decade he did his work in spite of this terrible malady of the throat, and died with it, though still in harness to the last. On his death bed, he asked his doctor’s permission to go to his conference. When the doctor refused, he went ahead and mapped out the work for Bishop
McTyeire to handle for him and was in the actual process of giving the instructions to his friend, Dr. Haygood, President of Emory College, to carry to Bishop McTyeire, when he died. He was faithful to his mission to the very end.

Judge L. Q. C. Lamar said that of all the great Georgians, he considered Bishop Pierce the first. And Bob Toombs said of him that he was the most symmetrical man he had ever known—the handsomest in person, the most gifted in intellect, and the purest in life.