

SOUTHERN METHODISM AND THE NEW SOUTH CREED: A REEVALUATION OF THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

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In the spring of 1872, members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were treated to a rare public debate between two of their bishops in pages of the *Christian Advocate*, the denominational newspaper. The two clerics traded acid-laced barbs and, at one point, each insinuated that the other was going to destroy the church by playing the role of Uzzah, the Israelite who tried to steady the Ark of the Covenant when oxen carrying it stumbled and died instantly for defying God's commandment. Bishop George F. Pierce grew outraged at men who were trying to establish a professional seminary, which he saw as a direct defiance of both scripture and Methodist tradition. Pierce stridently wrote that if the Southern Church established a university and seminary, then the system of itinerancy would crumble and the church would cease to be a religion of the heart and instead be baptized in vanity and pretentiousness. Bishop Holland N. McTyeire resented Pierce's outspoken opposition to a plan for a university that he believed would allow the Southern Church explicitly to expand its mission to more affluent classes of southerners to fulfill Christ's Great Commission.¹ Given this rhetoric expressing fear for the survival of the church, it is surprising that few religious historians have examined, much less explained, the church's postwar southern context that gave birth to this controversy and allowed the circuit rider, as Hunter Farish so brilliantly put it, to dismount.²

¹ References to the 'Southern Church' are to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

² Hunter Dickson Farish, *The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A Social History of Southern Methodism, 1865-1900* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1938). Early accounts of the debate from Methodist historians indulged in hagiography and biographers of both Pierce and McTyeire painted a conciliatory portrait and pointed out that the two men remained close friends for the rest of their lives in spite of their differences. See O. P. Fitzgerald and C. B. Galloway, *Eminent Methodists: Twelve Booklets in One Book* (Nashville: Publishing House M. E. Church, South, 1897); George G. Smith, *The Life and Times of George Foster Pierce, D.D., LL. D.: Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; With His Sketch of Lovick Pierce, D.D., His Father* (Nashville: Hunter and Welburn, 1888); and John J. Tigert IV, *Bishop Holland Nimmoms McTyeire: Ecclesiastical and Educational Architect* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1955). Scholars examining the history of Vanderbilt University have been limited by the confines of institutional history when examining the body that emerged from the controversy. See, for example, Paul K. Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985). Perhaps the best assessment of the controversy is James W. Fraser, "'The Bishops, I presume, are divided': Methodist Opposition to the Establishment of Vanderbilt University," *Southern Studies* 24 (Summer 1985): 168-172, where he correctly placed the debate within the context of "the development of a post-college professional school for the training of Protestant clergy." The most recent analysis of the controversy is Christopher Michael Bishop, "The Highest Style of Humanity: Religion, the New South Creed, and Holland Nimmoms McTyeire," (M.A. thesis, Western Carolina U, 2010).

The controversy, encompassing views on the priority of the call of God, the means and purposes for education and evangelism, and the simplicity of faith, can best be understood within the New South context of the pursuit of development and progress that absorbed many white southerners in the decades after the Civil War. Many southerners believed that their past, however glorified, was dead and that only sweeping change could lift the region out of an enormous economic, political, and social crater that placed them well behind the rest of the reunified nation. Somewhat inexplicably, many southerners “managed to persuade themselves . . . that the new era held unprecedented promise for the region.”³ Out of this hopeful context, the New South creed emerged.

Historian Paul M. Gaston argued that the New South creed developed in the wake of Appomattox “to inspire a program of action, [and] expressed faith in the South’s ability to bring about its own regeneration.”⁴ While Gaston primarily studied economic boosters such as Henry W. Grady, further inquiry reveals that the New South creed was a broad southern intellectual discourse that held that traditionalism was a handicap if the region hoped to find a powerful place in the modern America. The readily available language of progress that typified the New South creed was a shared dialect for many southerners who believed that the status quo was unacceptable, that stable institutions and infrastructure must develop to modernize the South. These thinkers developed plans to inspire a southern resurgence because they did not believe the region had the financial resources or expertise for these changes to come about organically. Sweeping proposals in speeches, editorials and pamphlets insisted that unspeakable wealth, power, prestige, and moral superiority were within the South’s grasp. These progressives aimed to inspire audiences and thus gain financing, often from wealthy northern benefactors, for a grand southern renaissance. Lastly, the New South message was produced by and was most beneficial for the middle class, the group quickly solidifying its social and political power in the place of the crumbling antebellum gentry.⁵

Southern Methodist churchmen within the New South creed paradigm not only wanted to reform church governance to reflect better the active role of the laity at the local level but also to raise its social status to claim the

³ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), viii.

⁴ Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 7.

⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1919* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1951), 27-29, 170-171, *passim*; idem., *Reunion and Reaction*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951), 35-37; Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 64-65, 167-168; Dan T. Carter, *When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985), 6-23; James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1984), 16-20; Archie Vernon Huff, Jr., “A History of South Carolina United Methodism,” in *United Methodist Ministers in South Carolina*, eds. Morgan David Arant, Jr. and Nancy McCracken Arant (Columbia, SC: South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1984), 409-410.

loyalty of greater numbers of middle class bankers, lawyers, editors, jurists, educators, and businessmen. For these clerics, the church should be the region's social and religious flagship—a dignified and glorious symbol of a morally upright and regenerated South. The supposition of the progressives was that in order to expand their mission beyond their traditional (but not monolithic) rural and plain folk constituency and evangelize to the rich and the middle class, as required by the Gospel, southern Methodism must have a more educated ministry in order to better relate to the expanding professional class who usually preferred more learned ministers for their pulpits. Progressive Methodists found their cause in the establishment of a first-rate university that included a seminary for aspiring Methodist preachers. In addition to producing academically trained theologians for the pulpit, the university would also have a variety of professional schools to cater to affluent southerners, thus fortifying the reputation of the Southern Church as a middle class institution.

Not surprisingly, this caused tremendous friction with conservative churchmen. Traditionalist southern Methodists believed that a preacher, regardless of his educational background, should undertake a self-directed course of study while riding a rural circuit under the direction of an elder preacher who served as a kind of mentor. According to Methodist tradition, preachers were to “proclaim their own experience of conversion . . . in language understandable to their fellows.”⁶ While traditionalists did not want intellectually limited individuals in the pulpit, relating one's conversion experience required no specialized training.⁷ As a matter of course, ordaining bodies within the Southern Church typically loosely enforced church standards regarding a preacher's education and intellectual maturity. Any man who believed himself called by God could be ordained by an annual conference and start preaching right away, even if he had glaring educational shortcomings.⁸ After all, Methodists believed that the chief qualification for a preacher was the call from God, after which one only had to, as in the words of Christ, drop his net and become a fisher of others. Nothing could be greater than the touch of the divine. New South church leaders believed in the utmost necessity of the call but felt that this traditional system was not a viable approach for a church that ministered to a region desperately trying to turn the page by urbanizing and industrializing.

Three southern Methodists—Landon C. Garland, David C. Kelley, and Bishop Holland N. McTyeire—articulated the philosophy which progressives used to modernize the Southern Church. Through their writings in Nashville's *Christian Advocate*, historians can fully understand their ideas, motivations, and planning for a university and theological seminary. The postwar context and the intellectual paradigm of the New South creed in

⁶ Fraser, “The Bishops, I presume, are divided,” 169.

⁷ Fraser, “The Bishops, I presume, are divided,” 176-179.

⁸ Christie Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997), 82-83, 86-92; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1977), 85.

which of they worked were inescapable, if perhaps unconscious, influences in their advocacy of a Methodist university and seminary. The method that Progressive Methodists used—publicizing a plan of action and claiming that such a development would help the South gain stature in the reunified nation—linked such clergymen with other southern progressives into a broad intellectual fraternity.

On the traditionalist side was Bishop Pierce, whose stubborn but ultimately futile loyalty to tradition failed to stop the progressive tide and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, further chipped away the few remaining vestiges of the church of Asbury. As even McTyeire conceded, Pierce's views enjoyed greater popularity among most rank-and-file Methodists. Pierce thus represented the resentment of the lower class people of a church and a region that often felt they were being dragged by the cart of progress against their will. All they wanted was to be left alone to practice what they knew to be the faith of their fathers. But times will inevitably change, and religion usually responds accordingly to remain relevant to society and future generations.

After his election to episcopacy in 1866, McTyeire led this push not only to keep southern Methodism relevant but to march the denomination into a new era of prominence. Other powerful proponents emerged, including Thomas O. Summers, whose tenure as editor the *Advocate* made the paper a bastion of progressive church politics.⁹ Just as Grady would later do in his famed *Atlanta Constitution*, progressive southern Methodists used the paper as a forum to publicize their views and thus a starting point to implement their plan of action.¹⁰

In 1869, McTyeire and Summers urged Garland to contribute six guest editorials in favor of ministerial education. Garland, a Virginian, received a bachelor of arts from Hampton-Sindey College in 1829 and taught a variety of subjects for several years at Washington College in Lexington before accepting a position, mostly due to his Methodist faith, at the newly founded Randolph-Macon College. Eventually, he became president of the struggling Methodist college and stayed until 1846. Garland later took a position at the University of Alabama, first teaching courses in science and mathematics and later becoming president of the institution in 1855. After the Civil War, Garland found a faculty position at the University of Mississippi where he stayed until becoming the chancellor of Vanderbilt University in 1875 at the age of sixty-five.¹¹ His extensive experience made him one of the most highly regarded educators in the entire South and certainly the most respected within the church. A lifelong advocate of higher education for ministers, Garland argued that southern Methodists, especially in towns, were more educated now and he concluded that “the time has arrived” for an institution

⁹ Charles T. Thrift, Jr., “Rebuilding the Southern Church,” in *The History of American Methodism*, vol. 2, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 307-308.

¹⁰ Gaston, *New South Creed*, 49; Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 21.

¹¹ Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 39-40.

to bring “higher intellectual culture” to the ministry.¹² He conceded that the system of itinerancy had not greatly harmed the early church but insisted that it now posed great impediment to reaching the middle class. Education would not turn southern Methodism into some Gnostic cult, but instead fulfilled Christ’s Great Commission to evangelize and “teach all nations” the glories of Christianity. He pondered how one could teach a subject which they had never mastered.

Garland spoke directly to the trend of professionalization in nineteenth-century America, arguing that the times required the ministry to become a profession in order to reach its highest potential. As historian James W. Fraser correctly noted, professionalization of the ministry in the mid-nineteenth century marked a dramatic shift in Methodism from what was previously viewed as an office to which one was called by God toward a more learned and professional model. While Garland believed that being a preacher required a divine calling, he lamented that the fact that in many cases “the laity [are] intellectually in advance of the clergy.”¹³ Aside from his embarrassment over the situation, Garland asserted that this situation placed the church in an untenable position when it came to preaching to professionals. Many Methodists revered professionals but still decried any educational standards for preachers as unbiblical, and Garland pointedly asked his readers if their opinion of a lawyer would be compromised if he “had never mastered the principles of private rights and wrongs” or of a physician ignorant of “the nature and remedies of disease.”¹⁴ By the same token, Garland wondered how Methodists could trust the reliability of sermons from a preacher who had never mastered ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Moreover, professionalism was crucial to push the Southern Church into the realm of higher society because specialized knowledge equaled influence, which would allow the church to penetrate the hearts of those at the highest level of southern society.

Scholar Burton Bledstein observes that the growth of professionalism in the nineteenth century enhanced the social status of middle class professionals because the weight of specialized education often made “amateurs . . . ‘trust’ in the integrity of trained persons.”¹⁵ And Garland explicitly acknowledged the importance to the church of high social status based on learning:

There are a great many *collateral* advantages which a minister would derive from high intellectual culture and from an extensive and varied store of knowledge. Nothing gives more respectability of character, or more weight to opinion; and these are the principal grounds of influence. The social position of such a minister would be greatly elevated. He would find ready access into every circle of society instructing and entertaining all with whom he might come into contact. His company would be

¹² *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 9, 1869.

¹³ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 9, 1869. See also Tigert, *Bishop Holland Nimmons McTyeire*, 149-151, 173-177; Farish, *Circuit Rider Dismounts*, 263-266.

¹⁴ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 9, 1869.

¹⁵ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 90.

sought universally and his influence would be felt throughout the community, affecting and promoting every true interest of mankind¹⁶

Garland decried current educational standards that he felt handicapped the ministry socially and religiously and thus mired the church in a bland sameness. Because individuals in local ordaining bodies often knew candidates personally, quarterly and annual conferences often ignored the prerequisite intellectual standards altogether and the burden of trying to minister, preach, and travel a circuit while simultaneously completing a course of study was an unreasonable expectation to place on an uneducated circuit rider. In the fashion of the New South creed, Garland unveiled plans for a unique theological seminary in Nashville, “a city of refinement and taste,” which would be a positive influence for young rustics called by the Lord into the cloth.¹⁷ While attendance would not be compulsory and graduates must still complete the traditional course of study while working as an itinerant preacher, Garland suggested that the work of endowing a seminary should go forward so that the church could be well prepared to meet the demands of a new age.

Garland insisted that a seminary would have untold benefits for both ministers and the souls of lost southerners. Reading and studying the Bible was not the job of an indolent mind, but in fact required a high level of knowledge and specialization. Commenting on the variety and complexity of the Bible, Garland quoted St. Augustine, who once wrote, “That whilst in the Bible there are shallows where a lamb may ford, there are depths where an elephant must swim.”¹⁸ Thus, preaching the Gospel required one to understand intimately King James English and, in order to study thoroughly and understand the original text of the scripture, one had to master ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. This necessarily required a great amount of preliminary learning before undertaking specifically theological education. Such an extensive background would give ministers voluminous reference points from which to frame sermons and allow them to make their points clearly and effectively to all regardless age, class, or educational attainment. While some worried that too much education would lead to dry and tedious preachments, Garland longed for educated and erudite sermons that majestically flowed “like living water gushing from an inexhaustible fountain—full, clear, sparkling, and refreshing.”¹⁹ This preaching would save the souls of countless southerners. Garland remained steadfast that preaching and saving souls must be done with the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, but preachers could not undertake their work without a high level of study and intellectual acuity.

While Garland championed the idea of a theological seminary, others pushed for something grander: the establishment of a southern university on

¹⁶ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 30, 1869.

¹⁷ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), November 13, 1869.

¹⁸ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 16, 1869.

¹⁹ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), October 23, 1869.

par with Harvard, Yale, or Oxford. Just a few months after Garland's articles, an essayist in the *Advocate* writing under the name "Progress," submitted several essays on the need for the South to establish its own elite university. The author was most likely David C. Kelley, the pastor of the prominent McKendree Church in Nashville. Among the most colorful preachers in the Southern Church, Kelley, a native Tennessean, earned both law and medical degrees, spent four years as a missionary in China, served in as a cavalry officer in the Confederate Army, and was, by all accounts, a very engaging and inspiring speaker. Although his articles in the *Advocate* suggest a great aversion to any kind of new theories, he has been remembered for having what historian Paul Conkin called "a lively, probing, [and] open mind," with some even suggesting he might have been open-minded toward Darwinism.²⁰ Kelley praised Methodist colleges but claimed that these schools were simply too small and broad in focus to have enough qualified professors to provide expert training in all scholastic fields. For example, a college like Wofford might have one or two chairs in natural science, but a top university would have as many as sixteen professors devoted to its various branches.

His personal views on new scientific theories notwithstanding, Kelley knew how to strike the right chords with his readers and warned that southerners desirous of the highest caliber schooling would eventually end up in New Haven, Princeton, or the iniquitous Boston because graduates from southern schools could not deliver such esteemed expertise. This presented a problem for southern Methodists because of controversial scientific and theological theories popular at northern universities. For instance, the work of Charles Darwin had radical implications because evangelical Christians, as scholar Ferenc Morton Szasz observes, "believed the planet on which they lived to be only a few thousand years old. This world, moreover, was fundamentally static. It was bound by two specific events—Creation and the Last Judgment—and it was one in which each species brought forth its own kind."²¹ Aside from contradicting the way that southern Methodists understood the Earth's history, evolution denied the fall of humankind because Darwin's theory saw human beings on a gradual march of biological improvement. If this were the case, then humankind had little need in a redeemer.²² Similarly, Higher Criticism emerged in nineteenth-century Germany as "a literary and historical study of the Bible with the object of determining the composition, the dates, and the authors of its various books."²³ Willis Glover explains the great anxiety that Higher Criticism, which quickly moved to the United States, caused conservative churchmen: "Bound up inextricably with every phase of the religious experience of evangelicals, an experience that touched their lives at every significant point, was the Bible—a Bible that was

²⁰ Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 8.

²¹ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University, AL: U Alabama P, 1982), 2.

²² Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America*, 4.

²³ Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Independent Press Limited, 1954), 18.

not merely a source book for the early history of their religion, but a Bible that was the authoritative and infallible World of God.” He went on, “The inerrancy of the Bible was so intimate a part of religious thought and life that a denial of it seemed to threaten the destruction of faith itself.”²⁴ The very idea that the Bible emerged out of historical contexts, evolved over time, and had numerous authors was seen as heathen blasphemy by many American churchmen.

Southern clergymen feared what might happen to young men who wanted a first rate or elite education and thus traveled north because the South did not have a large-scale university of its own that could propagate “proper” theological and scientific teachings. Moreover, commentators like Kelley had grown deeply frustrated over the general state of higher education in the South. In the antebellum period, much of the education in the South focused on the classics and did not offer much in the way of pragmatic or vocational training. After the war and the almost utter destruction of its state colleges and private denominational institutions, southerners had few educational opportunities. In addition to advocating for the establishment of professional schools, many New South creed boosters wanted southerners to begin developing expertise in scientific agriculture, business, and engineering to advance the fortunes of the South.²⁵ However, religious leaders feared atheistic skepticism of the northern academy would seduce expatriate southerners onto the path to eternal damnation, thus founding a modern Christian university in the South was not only a practical but a moral imperative for southern Methodists.

Kelley proposed such a university and acknowledged it would come with a steep price. He promised, however, that “[m]oney is the guarantee of success.” Northern schools boasted large endowments that enabled them to build expensive laboratories and Princeton even planned to construct a \$250,000 observatory. Conference colleges might be able to raise a \$100,000 endowment, but this would never be enough to stem “the tide of rationalistic atheism” flowing in from outside the region. For its part, southern Methodism “must have an intellectual temple that shall rise as high, and stand as firm, and shine as far, as those of Oxford or Heidelberg.”²⁶ To accomplish this, the church must launch a massive fundraising effort to find several wealthy patrons to donate \$50,000 to such a glorious cause. As far as the unlikelihood of financing such a project, Kelley would hear no negative talk and declared that defeatism would get the church nowhere.²⁷

Taken together, the ideas of Garland and Kelley broadly represented the reforms pushed by educational advocates. First of all, progressives wanted the intellectual culture of the ministry to be advanced beyond the basic

²⁴ Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists*, 16.

²⁵ Dan R. Frost, *Thinking Confederates: Academia and the Idea of Progress in the New South* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2000), 1-18, 39-64.

²⁶ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 23, 1870, see also April 16, 1870.

²⁷ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 30, 1870.

course of study the *Discipline* required. The minister of their vision would be an educated and refined preacher, theologian, pastor, and social leader based specifically on his professional education. Sophisticated preaching would uplift the spirit and warm the heart, unlike the dry sermons associated with older elite churches. Not only through a seminary, but more broadly, a university would catapult the church into a leading position in southern society. By providing a number of professional schools, the church could keep its brightest minds in the South and fortify the growing professional class that typically lived in small towns and urban areas. Furthermore, a university would enable the church to guard southern society against dangerous theological trends from the North and simultaneously advance the educational (and thus economic) fortunes of the South at large. Through all of these things, the church would become a glorious tower of God for the region—a symbol of the region’s resurgence and moral superiority.

Garland and Kelley disseminated their views to a wide, powerful, and often very sympathetic audience within southern Methodism. Although some wanted a university and others focused more specifically on a seminary, all educational advocates felt optimistic about the prospects of reform at the 1870 General Conference. Making good use of his talents, Garland, a lay delegate, chaired the Committee on Education, which issued a majority report urging the establishment of “a Theological Institute under the control of the College of Bishops.” While attendance would not be compulsory for any aspiring minister, the conference summarily rejected the suggestion and instead adopted the far more conservative minority report that “endorse[d] the action of the last General Conference in reference to Biblical Chairs . . . with our existing colleges, as the best available means of training young preachers.”²⁸

In hopes of side-stepping the General Conference’s rebuke, Kelley implemented a scheme that ultimately led nine annual conferences to send delegations to a special convention called to consider pooling their resources to establish a university. Representatives convened in Memphis in January 1872. The committee, whose goal was to establish a university “where the youth of the Church and Country may prosecute theological, literary, scientific, and professional studies,” ultimately established a board of trustees for what was thus named the “Central University of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.”²⁹ The university would have normal, law, medical, liberal arts, and theological schools, with free tuition for any seminarian duly recommended by a quarterly or annual conference. The Board of Trustees acknowledged that Central University would need one million dollars to be viable in the long run, but most importantly, that they would require \$500,000 in endowment before opening.³⁰ Because they had no money and, quite frankly, no

²⁸ Fraser, “The Bishops, I presume, are divided,” 172-174. Quotation on 173.

²⁹ Minutes of the Board of Trust and of the Executive Committee, Special Collections of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee (JAH-L-VU), 1.

³⁰ Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 9-11.

support from the General Conference, the board had little reason to be confident that its dream would ever become a reality. Later in the year, several annual conferences withdrew their support and financial resources, making prospects appear gloomier.³¹

In spite of the financial troubles of Central University, the Memphis Convention, as it came to be known, was a seminal achievement for progressive Methodists under the influence of the New South creed. In the matter of a few weeks, however, Central University would meet its most vociferous critic, Bishop George F. Pierce. The native Georgian received his education at Franklin College, served as president of Emory from 1848 until 1854, but was most well-known for his entire career for his abilities in the pulpit. In fact, he was for decades one of the most popular—and fiery—preachers of any denomination in the South and drew large crowds to his sermons. Pierce questioned whether or not Methodism would cease to be a religion of the people and become a denomination of the few if progressive plans moved forward. The fiery Pierce saw the plans as a direct assault on the foundation of the Southern Church and would not pass an opportunity to derail plans he felt advanced the personal ambitions of the progressives.

After receiving an open-ended invitation from Summers to write a guest editorial in the *Advocate*, Pierce submitted an essay very critical of the founders of Central University. The old bishop had a very concise viewpoint reflecting what he expected out of his church: simplicity. When considering the progressive plans, Pierce wrote that “[a]ll the Methodism in me (and there is a great deal of it) rises up in stern revolt” because “a regular theological training . . . will complicate our itinerant system, will slowly, but surely, modify it, and finally break it down.” Pierce reminded his audience that the call was the most important qualification for a preacher, not education. “God will call all the *educated* men he wants, and the truly called—if obedient and faithful—of what ever class, will ‘study to show themselves approved’ and ‘their profiting shall appear unto all men.’”³² That Methodism had “a ministry right out from the people—understanding their thoughts and feelings” made the group superior to other denominations and Pierce took direct aim at ministers who jealously looked at the goings on of other denominations in the field of seminary education.³³ Pierce proclaimed that “I do not believe that we are a whit behind the best, except in pompous pretention.” Furthermore, Methodist preachers were more emotional, fiery, and thus better in the pulpit than other denominations and the church never had been, nor would be, an inferior institution if it continued its historical path. Instead of looking for a carpeted downtown sanctuary, preachers must zealously go to the people. Only in pursuit of leading others to salvation would ministers receive power and grace.

As to his specific complaints, Pierce believed that a seminary would de-

³¹ Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 9-12; Farish, *Circuit Rider Dismounts*, 270-271.

³² *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), March 2, 1872.

³³ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 27, 1872.

stroy the individuality of a young preacher. Circuit riders, by design, should learn their craft in the rugged fields of evangelism, not in a classroom listening to dry and spiritless lectures from a professor who might have never preached a sermon in his life. Contact with the people and prayerful biblical study was the only real way to learn the role of the minister. In the ideal situation, the young men should follow Pierce's own example, who went to the countryside to preach to the people "[w]ith the Bible and the Discipline in my hands." Scholarly analysis learned in the seminary meant nothing to a traditional evangelical like Pierce, who declared, "'I do think' breaking hearts with the hammer of the word is better employment than splitting hairs with metaphysical acumen. 'I do think' evangelical sermons better than critical lectures."³⁴

Pierce also attacked the progressives for what he felt was their incorrigible social climbing and the class conflict it caused within the church. He lambasted McTyeire and proudly declared that "[w]e have no castes like the Hindoos among our preachers or people." Any social-climbing already in the church was a "curse and a snare."³⁵ He believed that the progressive plans were, by nature, socially divisive because "[u]niversity education is confined of necessity." Universities were the bastion of the established wealthy elites but such "[h]igh culture can never be general. To reach it requires time, talent, money, leisure."³⁶ High intellectual culture would never be common as long as poverty existed and Pierce wanted the church to remain faithful to the masses of which the faith first found reception in America.

In closing, Pierce showed his fire and declared, "Had I a million, I would not give a dime for such an object [as a seminary] . . . I am against it—head and heart, tongue and pen—'now and forever, one and indivisible.'" Pierce even assumed the mantle of the pejorative term "Hardshell," a word long used to ridicule Primitive Baptists when he wrote, "I am a *Hardshell Methodist*, just foolish enough to believe that our economy is the wisest, best, and most effective the world ever saw, and exceedingly jealous of all tinkering with it." Despite his blustery rhetoric, he did close on a note that showed insight into the situation that gripped his church. Pierce wrote that the church was "beginning . . . to deify talent, and talk too much about the 'age,' and 'progress,' and the demands of the times, for the simplicity of our faith, or the safety of the church. Not by might or power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord."³⁷

But if anybody could defend social-climbing to the church, it was McTyeire. What Pierce had in fire, McTyeire had in intellect. Born in 1824 in South Carolina, McTyeire received his college education at Randolph-Macon, ironically enough, during Garland's tenure. After preaching for a number of years in Virginia, Alabama, and Mississippi, McTyeire moved to

³⁴ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), May 18, 1872.

³⁵ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 27, 1872.

³⁶ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), March 23, 1872.

³⁷ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), May 18, 1872.

New Orleans and there ministered to both mixed race and slave congregations while simultaneously founding and editing the *New Orleans Christian Advocate*, the chief Methodist periodical for the Deep South. Eventually, his editorial skills caught the attention of the General Conference and he became the editor of the *Christian Advocate* in Nashville in 1858 and stayed at that position until the fall of Nashville in 1862. McTyeire became a bishop in 1866 and until his death in 1889 was regarded by most to be the most powerful bishop in the Southern Church. Throughout the debate with Pierce, the combative bishop sometimes avoided the real issues at hand and instead picked apart Pierce's less refined language and tried, usually successfully, to make Pierce look foolish. McTyeire's views on the importance and the benefits of education to the ministry are very similar to those held by Garland, but he did offer a unique defense of raising the social status of Methodism. McTyeire conceded that high intellectual culture would never be universal and, as Pierce argued, would take "money, time, and leisure." But he cleverly asked why Methodists could not attain such things through hard work and devotion to the Lord. To abandon a mission for the higher classes was indeed a mistake:

Give up a scheme for broader and higher literary and ministerial training in our Church, and what then? We must be content with the lower and restricted sphere of usefulness. "The mission of Methodism," he [Pierce] lets us know, "is to the masses of society—not the select few—a favored class." What our enemies and patronizing friends have said of us is even so—that Methodism will do very well for rude settlements and common people, but when they have become cultivated and refined, we are to turn them over to other Churches prepared to take charge of them! I hope to be pardoned for declaring that I am not resigned to that condition, either for myself or my brethren. I claim Methodism a mission to all classes. "All souls are mine," saith the Lord. A Church of Jesus Christ has no right to confine itself to, or exclude itself from, any class; and if any necessity appears for doing so, it is a demonstration that its ministerial training demands enlargement.³⁸

For McTyeire, the condescension of other denominations would make the church less useful. For example, at the time there was a commission to revise the English Bible. Northern Methodists, English Wesleyans, and others all sent delegates, but southern Methodism had no scholars competent enough for such a massive undertaking. McTyeire claimed that they would simply look at the raggedy Southern Church and say, "Confine yourselves to your mission among the masses, and take such a book as we make up for you."³⁹

McTyeire made it clear that he only wanted ministers called by God, never considered making theological training mandatory, and did not want to forsake the common folk of the South. "There is no danger, hardly a possibility in the proposed plans of ministerial improvement, of isolating ourselves from what Bishop Pierce is pleased to call 'the common people.'" His worry was that the social position of Methodism was already waning and he

³⁸ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 6, 1872.

³⁹ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), April 6, 1872.

insisted the church must be useful wherever it could do good or fall into the waste bin of history. As Garland suggested, McTyeire had no plans to scrap the current course of study, but did suggest that more intense biblical scholarship should be provided for by the church. Refusal to do so would doom the church. In a historical discussion of the Baptists, McTyeire reminded his audience that their sister denomination split over seminary education into Missionary Baptists and the Hardshells, whose ministers Pierce praised as effective despite the fact that they “have hardly ever been to college to at all.” McTyeire noted that Missionary Baptists had multiplied, grown fruitful, and earned social respectability specifically because of the authority and power that came with the education of their clergymen at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. On the other hand, “It is a cardinal tenet with the Hardshells that the Lord will,” quoting Pierce, “‘call all the educated ministers he wants’ . . . The Hardshells have gone on fighting missions and an educated ministry, and organs, and choirs, until they have fought well-nigh out of every city and town and enlightened neighborhood, and have consigned themselves where Bishop Pierce wishes this theological scheme—to the shades of oblivion.”⁴⁰

While McTyeire got the better of Pierce on the rhetorical front and the school did receive a few nominal donations, Pierce made fund-raising well-nigh impossible for Central University by creating such a heated public controversy.⁴¹ Had the story ended here, McTyeire and his allies surely would have gone down in defeat. As it turned out for McTyeire, however, a trip to New York City for a medical procedure and an extended convalescence turned out to be a stroke of great fortune because his host was none other than Cornelius Vanderbilt, the husband of his wife’s second cousin. When McTyeire returned to his home in Nashville with a \$500,000 donation from the Commodore to Central University, he claimed a dramatic victory for progressive Methodism over traditionalists looking to foil the scheme. Planning and building on what was thus named Vanderbilt University went forward at once and Pierce backed down, vowing not to damage an existing Methodist institution.

On a deeper level, Vanderbilt’s gift symbolized something greater than victory to progressive Methodists: the rebuilding of the region with northern money. A central plank of the broader New South creed was that improvements to the region should come from northern investment as a form of sectional reconciliation. While progressive Methodists never explicitly commented on the need for northern financing, they surely knew that generosity would need to come from outside of the South as a matter of necessity. Vanderbilt, however, was very cognizant of the implications of his gift and insisted that one of his key motivations was “to strengthen . . . the ties which

⁴⁰ *Christian Advocate* (Nashville), May 4, 1872.

⁴¹ Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 12

should exist between all geographic sections of our common country.”⁴² And indeed, many southerners delighted in the gift, with one politician remarking that “Commodore Vanderbilt has done more for reconstruction than the Forty-second Congress.”⁴³ Nashville was especially grateful and passed a resolution thanking Vanderbilt and declared that it “will go toward accomplishing that union of heart on the part of the citizens of this great country so deeply needful for our common good.”⁴⁴

Many of Pierce’s fears came to fruition. Urban churches became increasingly powerful, while rural churches and circuits lost much of their influence in quarterly and annual conferences. Education became increasingly central to the Methodist ministry and many preachers sought out more comfortable appointments in town rather than being assigned to a rural circuit. Once the bread and butter of American Methodism, rural circuits became the neglected backwater of southern religion. But the settling of the itinerancy was never caused, even indirectly, by Vanderbilt’s divinity school. The seminary at the fledging university, which never earned widespread prestige as a Methodist institution, never had a sizeable influence on the ranks of the Methodist itinerancy. The continuing settling of the circuit rider was a trend that began well before the Civil War that nobody could stop.⁴⁵ This fact does not make the end of the controversy a foregone conclusion, a moot exercise by the fiery Pierce. McTyeire, his allies, and, by extension, the church finally endorsed the professionalization of the southern Methodist clergy by deploying the language of the New South creed. After this political victory, the clergy professionalized more rapidly. By the end of the century, the religious dimension of the New South creed pushed toward a middle class model and the Southern Church was indeed a middle class and elite church that held sway over the rest of society, just as Garland, Kelley, and McTyeire envisioned. Not only did the church consciously and explicitly embrace the middle class and its mindset, but it also fully turned its back on the church of Asbury.

As one century gave way to another, Southern Methodism had become one of the most powerful non-political institutions in the South, with its only serious competition being the Southern Baptist Convention. Had McTyeire lived to an older age, he would have been proud to see the results that the progressive New South creed had on his church. Congregations full of wealthy and generous professionals built beautiful sanctuaries and its members tirelessly engaged in benevolence programs and sent missionaries abroad to win souls for the Lord. At home, Methodist women became active in the prohibition movement and were able to help it become a national political and moral force. Methodist preachers, dismantled for good, became pillars of

⁴² Letter to Holland N. McTyeire from Cornelius Vanderbilt, dated December 2, 1875, John J. Tigert IV Collection, Box 2, Folder 24, JAHU-VU.

⁴³ Quoted in Thrift, “Rebuilding the Southern Church,” 309.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, June 24, 1876; see also Edward J. Renehan, Jr., *Commodore: The Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 278 and Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 18.

⁴⁵ Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 40-54.

society in small towns and big cities alike and the church was viewed by its members as a glorious symbol of southern virtue. But just with other incarnations of the New South creed, the religious dimension of this intellectual discourse often ignored inconvenient realities and declared a rousing victory for its program that it did not truly deserve, a trend Gaston compared to Hans Christian Anderson's fable *The Emperor's New Clothes*.⁴⁶

While the Southern Church embraced the middle class, others were left behind. Poor whites drifted from the farm to the factory, poverty lingered, their bleak lives did not brighten, and although Methodist women took a lead role in bringing the Social Gospel to the Southern Church, the church failed stridently and systematically to bring its considerable resources to bear to mitigate the suffering of poor whites in the region.⁴⁷ The General Conference of 1914 did officially adopt the tenets of the Social Gospel, but their efforts fell well short of their northern counterparts. African Americans, removed from the church ever since the founding of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) in 1870, became mired in a grinding poverty, epitomized by the brutal reality of sharecropping.⁴⁸ Eventually, not only lynchings, but Jim Crow would come to the region and the Southern Church, one of the South's great moral compasses, failed to act decisively. It is the irony of this religious dimension of the New South creed that, for all of the flowery rhetoric and promises to improve the region through education, their social blindness to the real needs of the poor and the oppressed never allowed them to become stewards to all people of the South, as they righteously claimed they would. As it turned out, neither McTyeire or Pierce recognized true the hand of Uzzah.

⁴⁶ Gaston, *New South Creed*, 187-214; Bishop, "The Highest Style of Humanity," 90-111.

⁴⁷ For efforts of southern Methodist women see, John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: the Women's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982).

⁴⁸ There were other exceptions to the church's failure to create a program to uplift the South's new industrial proletariat. For example, Methodist layman David English Camak founded the Textile Industrial Institute to help provide education to young textile workers in Spartanburg, South Carolina. This school ultimately evolved into Spartanburg Methodist College, a junior college now under the auspices of the South Carolina Annual Conference. See David English Camak, *Human Gold from Southern Hills* (Spartanburg, SC: by the author, 1960). For the history of the CME Church see Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis: CME Publishing House, 1985).