Thomas Frederic Dixon, Jr. Collection 

Series 7: News Clippings

Newspaper: *The Charlotte Observer*

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Title: When Thomas Dixon Preached in North Carolina

Byline: Charles H. Dickey

Pastorates In Raleigh and Goldsboro Very Successful

Called to Boston and Thence to New York, Where Rockefeller, Sr., Offered Half Million to Provide Him a Million Dollar Building; Turns to Lecture Platform.

“I have held two pastorates in North Carolina – one at Goldsboro and one in Raleigh – as well as two other pastorates, one of these being in Boston and the other in New York City,” Thomas Dixon told me the other day when I asked him about his career as a Baptist preacher.

Dixon later, beginning at 40, wrote more than a score of novels, of which approximately 5,000,000 copies, all told, were sold. He also wrote nine plays and six motion pictures. Three of his books, including his first novel, “the Leopard’s Spots,” sold approximately a million copies each. I had been talking to Mr. Dixon about the years when he was getting his education at Wake Forest college. He told me that he naturally would have gone to the University of North Carolina, except for the fact that while his brother, A.C., was there, the school was under a cloud for awhile. The he went on to say that he naturally went to Wake Forest for his education.

During the time when he lived in Cleveland county, he had joined the New Prospect Baptist church, of which his father was pastor. Soon after he had finished at Wake Forest college, and at the age of 22 years, he was called to the pastorate of the Baptist church in the little city of Goldsboro in eastern North Carolina.

GOLDSBORO MINISTRY.

But I had better let Mr. Dixon tell his story in his own way: “I had, of course, a wonderfully interesting and beautiful work, beginning in Goldsboro, where I remained for six months. There was an incident which happened there about which I laugh every time I think of it. One Mrs. Millard was the leading woman there then. I made quite a sensation and had great crowds coming into my church. The Baptist church, at that time, was the smallest congregation in town, and Mrs. Millard was very much elated at my getting those great crowds, and she wanted me to go after the Methodists.

“But I loved the Methodists, and I could not go after them.

“I have very many tender recollections of my brief stay in that little city. That was my first charge, and I had determined to make good at it. So, upon the whole, that brief period in which I was there was a very happy one, and a very prosperous one for the church.”

I remember to have heard a number of interesting stories relating to Mr. Dixon’s pastorate there. Mr. H. B. Parker, an attorney who practices there today, has told me a good deal about the buildings used by Mr. Dixon during his brief stay there. The old church in which he preached has long since given way to a new and modern structure.

MOVES TO RALEIGH.

The young preacher had not long been there until he began to attract the attention of other churches. He had been in Goldsboro only six months when he received a call to become pastor of the Second Baptist church in Raleigh. This being a larger church, and a larger congregation, and affording a larger opportunity, the young preacher was soon on his way to the capital city of his native state.

The house in Raleigh where he then lived was situated on Person street, between Oakwood avenue and Polk street. The house was torn down several years ago to make room for a play-ground for the Murphey high school. The Second Baptist church has long since given way to the more modern Tabernacle Baptist church, of which the Reverend Forrest C. Feezor is pastor today.

But the story of Mr. Dixon’s coming to Raleigh and of his tenure of office there is best told from the old files of the Raleigh News and Observer during that time. I shall quote excerpts from the same:

Tuesday, April 12, 1887: “After the services in the Second Baptist church Sunday night, last, the church members met in conference and extended a call to the Reverend Thomas Dixon, of Goldsboro, to become pastor of the church.”

Tuesday, April 19, of the same year: “Many people in Raleigh will be glad to learn that the Reverend Thomas Dixon, of Goldsboro has accepted the call to the pastorate of the Second Baptist church in this city. Mr. Dixon’s reputation as an eloquent, logical and forceful speaker and preacher is wide-spread. He is cordial, winning and possessing. He is energetic and strong as a minister, and will be a great acquisition to the Christian workers of Raleih. The Goldsboro church will give him up with regret and not without an effort to get him back. He will preach his first sermon in this city on the evening of the first Sunday in May.”

May 17: “At the Second Baptist church three members were received into the fellowship of the church, two of them being the Reverend Thomas Dixon, the new pastor, and his wife. W. T. Womble welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Dixon on behalf of the church. Mr. N. B. Broughton gave a most cordial welcome in behalf of the Sunday school, and the Reverend C. T. Bailey, (father of Senator Josiah William Bailey) of The Biblical Recorder, the organ of the North Carolina Baptist convention, welcomed them to their new work on behalf of the Baptists of the state.”

HAVE TO ENLARGE CHURCH.

Tuesday, June 7: “On last Sunday night after the services, a special conference was held, at which the deacons and officers submitted a proposition to the church. They unanimously recommended, in view of the increasing congregations that have more than filled the building, and sometimes crowded it to overflowing, that the church structure be re-modeled by taking out the cross partition so that the floor space of the Sunday school room and main body may all be thrown into one great auditorium, and further, that the church then, at once in this spacious building, form itself into the Tabernacle organization with Sunday services at 11 o’clock A.M., and 4:30 o’clock P.M.

“The organization is to be made broad and thorough for the most aggressive Christian work. After the building is re-modeled and the organization completed, the church will be known as the ‘Raleigh Baptist Tabernacle.’

“The proposition of the deacons was at once adopted by the conference. The work of remodeling the building will begin immediately and will soon be completed. The work will not interfere with regular services. Special services will be held in dedicating the new auditorium.”

June 21: “Work was completed yesterday in removing the partition-wall which separated the main auditorium room from the Sunday school room, throwing both rooms into one large auditorium, with a seating capacity of 1,200. The attendance at the church has become so large as to demand this or some other means for increasing the accommodation.”

SERMON SUBJECTS.

At this point it seems to me that it would be interesting, by way of noticing the trend of the mind of the youthful preacher, to set forth some of the subjects upon which he was speaking to his Raleigh audiences in those youthful days of his ministry there.

At random I set down the following: The Hidden Artist, The Man of the People, The Crystal and Coral, The Magnet of Nations, Namby Pambyism, The Kingdom Come, Playing the Fool, Poverty, Liars, Henry George and Socialism, Socialism, The Blues, Anchors, Nature and Nature’s God, To An Unknown God, The Power of Money, The Cloud’s Silver Lining, The True Christian Theory of Amusements, Belshazzar’s Feast, etc.

But to go on with the account from the files of the old Raleigh newspaper:

“The Reverend Thomas Dixon, Jr., the pastor, is making the Wednesday evening lectures very attractive and interesting. He has adopted a new plan for Raleigh – that of devoting one evening each week to a lecture on some current, important topic, either local or general.

“These lectures are well-studied and carefully prepared and made to the members of the church and to others who may attend, and are at once condensed, explanatory and very instructive – shedding the best light on certain matters that the members may not have time themselves to investigate. The feature is a wholesome and profitable one and is greatly appreciated.”

July 16: “The Raleigh Baptist Tabernacle was formerly dedicated on Sunday, last, with interesting and impressive exercises. Large crowds attended both the morning and the evening exercises.

START SOCIAL SERVICE.

August 18: “At a meeting of the Young Men’s Missionary union of the Baptist Tabernacle held last night, the matter of the free dispensary, which was established at the last meeting, was taken up. The physicians elected to the charge of the dispensary reported the amount of money which would be necessary to finance operations. The report was referred to the board of managers, who will take immediate steps to raise the required and begin practical operations at once. September is probably the time at which the dispensary will be open, and consultation and medicine given free to all white people who may be unable to pay for the same. The consulting physicians are Doctors A. J. Buffaloe and A. W. Goodwin.

“In addition to these features, it is proposed to furnish reading tables and literature for the benefit of patients while waiting. The office will be in the Tabernacle building and will be open for at least one hour and probably longer.”

October 18: “The Reverend Thomas Dixon, Jr. of this city preached in Boston last Sunday. He has received two calls recently – one from Boston, with a salary of $5,000 attached, and one from Philadelphia, with the same salary.

Thursday, November 10: The Reverend Thomas Dixon has notified the deacons of the Baptist Tabernacle church that he will tender his formal resignation as pastor on next Sunday, November 13, 1887.

CONGREGATION IMMENSE.

Tuesday, November 15: “At the Baptist Tabernacle in the morning, the Reverend Thomas Dixon, in lieu of preaching a sermon, gave an informal talk incident to his resignation as pastor. An immense congregation were present and heard one of the most eloquent and well-worded addresses ever delivered in the city.

“Sound and logical reasons were given for his resignation and though the talk was intended principally for the members of the church, everyone of the vast -- listened with eager attention, and everyone left regretting, more than ever, the intended departure of the pastor, but well satisfied that it was strictly in the line of duty and brought about by the most noble motives.”

Wednesday, November 23: “The Reverend Thomas Dixon, Jr., and family, left yesterday for Boston.”

It will be interesting, now that we have drawn on the files of an old Raleigh newspaper, to come back and catch up with the trend in the words of Mr. Dixon himself. Here is what he said concerning his ministerial activities at this time:

“I went from Goldsboro to Raleigh to the Baptist Tabernacle. There I had a brief and very happy ministry. N. B. Broughton was the superintendent of the Sunday school. He had the biggest Sunday school in Raleigh. I may add that this is still the biggest Sunday school in Raleigh. He was a very efficient layman and my personal friend.

IN BOSTON AND NEW YORK.

“I was called from there to Boston to the Broudly Street Baptist church.

“I learned to like those Yankees very much. I had a most delightful and interesting life in Boston. I found the Yankees so much like our folk down south that I thought I had gone back home.

“I was called from Boston, after a considerable period of time, to New York city to the 23rd Street Baptist church. They promised me a building like Tremont Temple in Boston, and they came near putting it up after I got there.

“John D. Rockefeller, Sr., agreed to give $500,000 to it if the others would give the other half million. Mr. Rockefeller was a warm friend of mine in the church. He came to hear me preach. The proposition would have gone through except a deacon in Doctor McArthur’s church was jealous of the new youngster who has come to raise a rumpus, and he prevented it.

“I went out from the 23rd Street church and established The People’s church. We held our meetings in the Academy of Music. That was the largest auditorium in the city of New York. I had it full every Sunday night for four years, and it was a terrible trial to meet expenses. I went into the lecture platform and lectured for years, and in this way supported my People’s church. I had 3,000 people every Sunday night for four years in the Academy of Music. But it was a terrible trial to meet expenses, and I got heart-sick over the outlook in New York and decided to become a writer.

ENTERS LECTURE FIELD.

“I was resigned from that church and went immediately into the lecture field. And while engaged in lecturing all through the country, I was planning the course of what turned out to be my very unusual literary career.

And this we have the story from the lips of Thomas Dixon, himself, from some of the people where he served – notably Carrie

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L. Broughton, state librarian at Raleigh – and from the files of a newspaper in one of the cities where he lived, which seemed to get a great kick out of playing up the popular young preacher.

One wonders about this change in the life plan of Thomas Dixon. There is a story, current about Wake Forest today, to this effect. It is said that when he was a student there that one night he and a group of other young men were sitting about in one of their rooms talking about the future and planning what they would do. The story goes that Thomas Dixon said, “In 20 years from now, I will be the pastor of the biggest church in this country.”

He came near doing just that. And is his plans in the great metropolis, which were backed by none other than John D. Rockefeller, Sr., himself, had gone through, the chances are, that in view of what we know of his remarkable abilities today, he would soon have had the largest church in New York city, and therefore, one supposes, the largest church in the nation.

Only this can be said: The man achieved mightily as a youthful preacher: his abilities on the lecture platform brought out the general opinion that he was the greatest orator since Henry Grady, and the fact that he made $1,250,000 in 27 years, as a writer, lifted him into a field, which, from the standpoint of monetary achievement, has no competition.

Any man is fortunate who can make a brilliant success in one field. A man is twice fortunate who can go to the top in two distinct fields. Thrice fortunate is the man who can brilliantly succeed in three fields. Thomas Dixon has done all of these things – and more.