*Pioneer Preachers of Northwest Alabama, 4*

**JAMES M. PICKENS:**

**PREACHING IN A WAR-WEARY LAND**

Wesley Thompson said: “There is in this world no struggle that is so intense and severe as that of civil strife; a man has no enemies so vicious and avowed as those of his own country and among his own acquaintance and kin, in civil strife.” (Adapted.) The years following the War Between the States were especially harsh for the people of Northwest Alabama. Many of the area’s most productive men were killed or dreadfully wounded in battle. Widows and orphans of warfilled the land. The people were demoralized and many in distress. Poverty abounded. Ante-Bellum Alabama died with the war and a new state emerged, born from the ashes of defeat and loss, along with the agony of Reconstruction. The painful rebirth of the South forms the dark and dreary background for the Christians of this region.

C. Wayne Kilpatrick referred to 1866-1880, the years following the war, as “the period of recovery and expansion.” He spoke particularly of Lauderdale County where: “T.B. Larimore, J.H. Dunn, John Taylor, and J.M. Pickens, along with others, salvaged the war torn churches in this county and nursed them back to a healthy growing stage. The twentieth century Churches of Christ may have been virtually nonexistent without the aid of these great men immediately following the war.”1 The weakened and scattered churches needed reviving, and the broken lives of many members needed mending. Both churches and members were plagued by the anguish, grief, and animosity caused by the war. There was also a great residue of ill will, even among the brethren, due to the bitter divisions over the war.

Those who saw the devastation of Northwest Alabama, created by four years of seesawing armies and renegade bands, agreed that it was not possible to adequately describe it to any who did not see it themselves; but they tried. Thomas D. Butler, a Northern Christian who traveled through the area by rail one year after the war, wrote: “From Decatur we traveled 100 miles through the Northern part of Alabama. There might be more desirable and inviting lands through the South, but I have rarely seen a richer and more beautiful tract of country than that extending from the Tennessee [River] to Corinth, Miss. The population of the region seems like ‘a few souls’ saved from a tornado, which, far and wide ... was swept with the scourge of death…. The ruins of happy homesteads are piled in solitary heaps, and the trail of war is broad, deep, and black. The hammer, axe, and saw are dexterously applied to the work of *reconstruction* within the former lines ... and the lands are being rapidly enclosed with millions and millions of rails.”2

Some Christians in Tennessee and states farther north saw the appalling condition of the churches in Alabama and sought to help. Robert B. Trimble of Spring Hill, Tennessee, was largely responsible for two exceptionally able young preachers casting their lot in Northwest Alabama to help revive the churches. These were James M. Pickens and T.B. Larimore. Pickens first came in 1866 and settled at Mountain Home in Lawrence County, the middle of his planned field of labor, where he started a school in 1868. Larimore came from Tennessee early that year to teach in Pickens’ school. Trimble was an associate of E.G. Sewell and David Lipscomb. Each of these had a hand in Larimore’s coming to Alabama to work with Pickens after finishing Franklin College. It is likely that Tolbert Fanning, whose early home and first preaching was in North Alabama, also encouraged Larimore’s coming.

Three men that came into that country after the war did noble service in reviving and strengthening the cause of Christ that had been left in shambles by the war. They were J.M. Pickens, T.B. Larimore, and Joseph H. Halbrook. James Madison Pickens, a native of Obion County, Tennessee, was a young man in his mid-thirties and already an evangelist of exceptional ability. His express purpose in coming to Northwest Alabama was to help rebuild New Testament Christianity in that region. He remained there, except for a brief time in Mississippi, until his tragic death in 1881.

Several good men labored zealously and sacrificially to re-establish the decimated churches in North Alabama during those trying years, but Pickens, although barely remembered today, was the first missionary on the scene and without doubt the most important single force during that period in gathering together the remnants of the churches of Christ, in restoring them to divine service, and in strengthening and guiding them through the nine turbulent years of Federal Reconstruction. Few men were better suited by temperament and talent to fill his place or to match his accomplishments.

In a letter to Fanning and Lipscomb, editors of the *Gospel Advocate*, Pickens wrote: “According to your request published in the Advocate, I give you a report of my labors South of the Tennessee. Seeing that the laborers were few in this section, and that the cause of our Master was sadly neglected, and likely to still be, I left the pleasant associations of our brethren in Tennessee in the month of February. The first place I visited was Tuscumbia, Ala., where I preached for eight days, during which we succeeded in organizing a small congregation from scattered remains of a once large one, that assembled in that place, to which we also had some additions. This congregation contains some good material, and displays commendable zeal, and is under the care of a competent elder [Dr. Lewis C. Chisholm], we being judge; but a meetinghouse is yet to be built.”3

Pickens further said: “Subsequently, in company with Bro. Trimble, I visited Russellville, but it is a sad tale of havoc which time and neglect have made of that once large and flourishing church—the members scattered, the house torn to pieces and almost destroyed, and the candlestick removed out of its place, were some of the features it presented. But still there were a few of the faithful left. We labored there a week, and after we set in order the things that were wanting the best we could, and added several unto them, we left them under a promise that they would keep up the regular meetings, which I learn they have continued to do ever since. The brethren will please remember that the house is yet to be repaired.”4

From Russellville, Pickens returned to Tuscumbia before going on to Corinth, Mississippi, where he found that both the church and its meetinghouse had been devastated by the war and Satan. As to his work at Tuscumbia, Dr. Chisholm, writing in the summer of 1866, said: “During the last winter our young brother, J.M. Pickens, rather accidentally visited Tuscumbia, where he very soon assembled a little flock that seemed both willing and anxious to keep the ordinances of the Lord, but at that time it seemed next to impossible to get a hearing, but the scale has now turned…. We are steadily gaining ground and adding to our number, but the labors of Bro. Pickens have not been confined to Tuscumbia alone. We had the pleasure of visiting Moulton, Ala., in company with him last week, and a more interesting meeting we never witnessed. The interest seemed to increase to the very close. The people seemed to be spellbound and taken captive by the majesty and force of the truth. The church that formerly met at that place was most effectually aroused from its lethargy, the erring reclaimed and sinners came flocking to the fold…. Bro. P[ickens], labored faithfully with us, and promises to continue his labors in North Alabama, Mississippi and West Tennessee.”5

J.H. McDonald of Moulton also wrote about the condition of the church at that place soon after the war. “We have been taught, year upon year, by those who understood the truth, yet such have been the troubles of the four or five years past, that our courage was not equal to our obligation, but we are aroused, and have renewed our vows…. One of you [Tolbert Fanning] who has labored for us will rejoice with us that there was within us such a will as would induce recovery from our waywardness. Our beloved brother, J.M. Pickens, from your state, spent some four or five days with us … in July, and his labors were successful in putting us to work in duties which belong to the house of the Lord, and in adding by baptism ten.”6

Later in 1866, Pickens held a five-day meeting at Frankfort, the county seat of Franklin County, and reorganized the church there. In reporting this, he wrote: “When I commenced there was a Methodist meeting going on, but they agreed to give way to me to preach one discourse, after which they discontinued their meeting, and I had the field alone. [At the close of the meeting] I organized a congregation of forty-two strong.”7 The meeting was held in the courthouse and resulted in fourteen “accessions”—twelve by immersion and “two from the Baptists.” The parents of F.D. and F.B. Srygley were baptized at Frankfort that year, evidently in that meeting. John Taylor, no doubt, participated in this meeting as his home was near Frankfort. The Rock Creek church that Taylor started soon after this included some that were baptized by Pickens in that Frankfort meeting.

In 1874, Pickens preached in meetings at Union on Buttahatchee River in Marion County, and at Berea, in Fayette County. In reporting these meetings, he said: “We made many pleasant acquaintances. Among others, that of John McCaleb, a veteran and a pioneer in Alabama, whom we met here for the first time. Old Bro. Taylor was with us in both of the meetings and gave much valuable assistance.”8

Pickens debated Dr. Jacob Ditzler, the great defender of Methodism, in 1873 at McKendree’s Chapel, a Methodist Church in Morgan County. David Lipscomb debated Ditzler two years earlier in Gallatin, Tennessee. Dr. T.W. Brents, L.B. Wilkes, and G.S. Sweaney also met the “doughty” Methodist in debate. B.F. Manire said Ditzler, not expecting to find such a man as Pickens in the backwoods of Northwest Alabama “had expected an easy victory, but was doubtless as badly disappointed as in any debates he ever had, for Pickens picked him all to pieces.”9

Pickens employed every avenue open to him—pulpit, classroom, and press—to carry the message of salvation to lost souls and to encourage his brethren to faithfulness in serving the Lord. For several years, he published gospel papers, first *The Christian Monthly*, and then *The Southern Christian Weekly*. These were circulated in North Alabama and parts of Mississippi and Tennessee. His debate with Ditzler was published in the *Southern Christian Weekly* in 1874. In his work, he was associated with John Taylor and preached near Taylor’s home in Franklin County. In 1867, Taylor traveled with Pickens and John A. Thompson to a consultation meeting in Columbus, Mississippi. Taylor was also with Pickens in a meeting in Morgan County, and other places, indicating a close relationship.

Even though Pickens was a comparatively young man, B.F. Manire described him as “a man of superior ability both natural and acquired.” Selina Campbell, the widow of Alexander Campbell, spent time with a niece at Wheeler station, Alabama, in the late 1860s. This was not far from Pickens’ home and he became acquainted with Mrs. Campbell. During a visit with her, she presented him with an inscribed copy of *Living Oracles*, a translation of the New Testament compiled and published by her husband more then 40 years before. The volume, which was Campbell’s personal copy, is preserved in the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville. In a letter to the *Christian Standard*, Mrs. Campbell spoke of Pickens’ work in Alabama. The *Standard* said: “Mrs. Campbell writing from Ingleside Plantation, near Courtland, Ala., tells of the needs of northern Alabama and how James M. Pickens, working at his own expense, has organized 8 churches and baptized over 200. She summons the brethren to support him and tells of her sympathy for the Freedmen.”10

Pickens frequently preached at Moulton and preached monthly at Mooresville where Gen. James A. Garfield had preached during his six months mission in the Tennessee Valley along the Memphis and Charleston Railroad during the War Between the States. Perhaps typical of Picken’s ministry was a two weeks tour through Marion and Fayette Counties in 1874. He wrote: “We were with the church at Buttahatchee six days; and delivered ten discourses. On Sunday the attendance was exceedingly large, so much so, that we had to abandon the house for the grove. During the week we occupied the house though the attendance was too large for its capacity.”11

Thirty-two were added to the church on the Buttahatchee, which was one of the largest in the state, numbering about 300 members. From there Pickens preached to a large congregation at the Hopewell Baptist Church sixteen miles away. The next morning found him at Berea with the church established by John Taylor. He preached eleven times and saw 22 souls added to the church. During the same year, Pickens attended a consultation meeting at Trenton, Tennessee, and addressed the brethren on the subject of, “Whiskey Making, Whiskey Selling, and Whiskey Drinking by Member of the Church of Christ.” We assume that he opposed all three activities.

Consultation meetings, usually unorganized gatherings of brethren, were beginning to develop into missionary societies, which were strongly opposed by J.M. Pickens. He spoke in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1870 in opposition to the Louisville Plan, an effort to revitalize the American Christian Missionary Society that had been receiving tepid support. His main opponent at the meeting was T.W. Caskey. He answered each point Caskey made in its favor. He also made an eloquent appeal for congregational independence and against centralized cooperation. He published his response to Caskey in the *Christian Monthly*, in August 1870.

In 1880, Pickens became a candidate for governor of Alabama on the Greenback-Labor Party ticket, known in the state as the People’s Anti-Bourbon Party. He carried only three counties: Lawrence, Colbert, and Winston, but received about one-third of the votes cast in the state. This was the year Garfield was elected president. The Alabama election was so corrupt that the *New York Times* sarcastically described the ballot box the Democrat’s used in the Black Belt as a “two story ballot-box.” A mechanism in the top box quickly discarded all black votes and replaced them with “pure white” ballots. Pickens would not likely have won with an honest election, but he believed the party would have faired better.

Pickens’ life ended February 2, 1881 when he was wantonly murdered “in broad daylight and within sight of his house.” The papers reported that Robert Letson mortally wounded William Davidson as he and Pickens were walking in a lane to the woods where some chopping was being done. Letson had accused Davidson of slandering his daughter. Pickens knocked the pistol out of Letson’s hand with an ax helve. There was a scuffle and Letson regained the pistol and shot Pickens twice, killing him instantly. This is based on a letter from Pickens’ son, J.M. Pickens, Jr., to Richard L. James that is in the Pickens’ collection at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville. Some believe Pickens’ was assassinated by political enemies because he planned to publish a newspaper to expose the Democrat’s corruption.

Paul Horton, writing on “The Assassination of Rev. James Madison Pickens and the Persistence of Anti-Bourbon Activism in North Alabama,” said: “In the wake of Pickens’s death Bourbons tended to insist that Letson's rage was motivated by Davidson’s slander of his daughter and that the case was clearly second-degree murder. Anti-Bourbons, on the other hand, saw the crime as a political assassination fitting a pattern that extended back to Klan outrages during Reconstruction. Bourbons, from this perspective, would not tolerate free speech and harassed or killed those who challenged them publicly.”12 However, we believe the son’s report of the matter.

It may be of interest to add that Horton further said: “A.H. Brittin of the Huntsville Advocate described Pickens as a man of ‘iron will, great energy and honest industry.’ He was ‘universally esteemed and greatly loved’ and ‘deeply’ sympathetic to the plight of ‘the oppressed and down-trodden sons of toil.’ Moreover, according to Brittin, he was ‘thoroughly imbued with a determination to right the gigantic wrongs under which ‘Ring Bourbonism’ had crushed the hopes of his fellow citizens.’ Pickens knew [Bourbon politician] Joe Wheeler, who summered near the town of Mountain Home to escape the valley heat. Pickens’s class perspective and his emotional religiosity clashed with Wheeler’s social climbing, reserved demeanor, and Episcopal prep-school upbringing. The two leaders did not like one another.”13 Horton, a student of Alabama politics in this period said: “Pickens’s philosophy was at the core religious.”

Pickens was only 45 and probably ready to do his greatest work. Historians of note regard his untimely death as a hindrance to the churches of Christ in North Alabama and the Mid-South. He established a number of churches, made numerous converts, and was a great power for good in encouraging, strengthening, and restoring churches in many places. He was principally responsible for reviving the churches at Russellville, Moulton, Frankfort, and Tuscumbia. He is also credited with organizing Christians in Florence, Mooresville, Danville, and Huntsville. He worked tirelessly in weekly preaching, and holding meetings and debates. Horton said: “He preferred to work with the less educated and the poor and was an outspoken critic of status-seeking city ministers who lost their true calling in an effort to keep up with the ‘appearances’ put on by their well-to-do congregations. Pickens’s ‘primitive’ Christian mission was devoted to the poor who could find dignity and self-respect in a simple, rock-solid faith.”14

**Notes**

1 *Journal of Muscle Shoals History*, Vol. 11.

2 *Christian Standard*, May 5, 1866.

3 *Gospel Advocate*, May 8, 1866.

4 Ibid.

5 *Gospel Advocate*, Sept. 11, 1866.

6 Ibid, Oct. 2, 1866.

7 Ibid, Sept. 18, 1866.

8 *Southern Christian Weekly*, Aug. 20, 1874.

9 B.F. Manire, *Reminiscences of Preachers and Churches in Mississippi.*

10 *Christian Standard*, April 27, 1870.

11 *Southern Christian Weekly*, Aug. 20, 1974.

12 *Alabama Review*, April 2004.

13Ibid.

14 Ibid.