HISTORY OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF
FITZGERALD, GA.

The citizenry of Fitzgerald in its early days was
transient character. Many people came, sojourned a while, and passed on, while a few
remained and reaped the rewards of their labors. The membership of the First Baptist Church has
been of a similar character, to a certain extent.

The First Baptist Church of Fitzgerald was con­
stituted Dec. 13th, 1896, the presbytery on the oc­
casion being composed of Dr. S. Y. Jameson, Rev. J.
J. Hyman, and Rev. Gibbs. Thirty-four mem­
ers entered the organization, of whom may be
mentioned the following: Mr. and Mrs. C. P. Mc­
Millan, J. L. Mays, H. Millington and wife, and their
two children. The names of the other charter mem­
ers we have been unable, after inquiry, to secu­

The little church had quite a rapid growth during
the first year of its existence. At least twelve were
baptized into the fellowship of the church during
1896, and others were received by letter, making a
total of sixty members, when the church united
with the Houston Association in the autumn of
1896. Brother C. P. McMillan was the messenger of
the church to the Houston Association on the oc­
casion of its reception into that ancient and histor­
ical body.

After remaining a member of the Houston Asso­
ciation for five years, the First Baptist Church of
Fitzgerald united with the Little River Association
in 1900. The church was located in the midst of the
southern portion of the territory of the latter asso­
ciation, and its action in uniting itself with the
Little River was a natural result of the geographical
convenience of the situation. Such action was
desirable and commendable also on other grounds.
The Fitzgerald church has always occupied a position of prominence in the missionary development of the territory surrounding her in Ben Hill and Irwin counties.

When, in the winter of 1896-1897 the first building of the church was erected, Gov. W. J. Northern donated the lots for the purpose. The Fitzgerald Baptist church also won a bell from that generous donor by being the first church to erect a house of worship in Fitzgerald. Dr. P. A. Jessup was instrumental in leading the church to remove its place of location, to a better part of the city. Dr. Jessup has been a mighty power in the evangelization and uplift of South Georgia during the past generation. Pastor at Eastman eleven years, at Cochran, five years, at Tifton four years, at Leesburg four years, at Cordele one year, at Sylvester five years, and working under the state board, and serving as temporary pastor at Fitzgerald for a short time, he left his mark upon the Lord's work all over the southwest portion of the state.

Among the servants of the Most High, who have occupied the honored position of pastor in the Fitzgerald church are the following, with the dates of their tenure of office: H. Millington, 1896-97; J. D. Norris, 1898; Frank Culpepper, six months in 1898; Dr. (W. N. or J. W.) Reaves, six months in 1899; Dr. F. W. Tyler, portions of 1899 and 1900; A. L. Blizzard 1900-1902; C. W. Minor, 1903-1905; T. G. Davis, 1906-1908; S. J. Farrish, 1908-1910; T. M. Callaway, 1910-1913; L. A. Cooper, 1914-1917; S. J. Baker for nine months in 1917 and 1918; and the present pastor, J. F. Singleton, 1918-1919. These brethren have wrought well elsewhere in and out of the state of Georgia, and are numbered among the leaders of denominational activity in the State and Southern Baptist Conventions. The Fitzgerald church has always aspired to the highest type of pastoral leadership, and her history and her accomplishments justify her policy in this matter.

Among the deacons of the church, who have wrought faithfully and laboriously from the date of organization to the present are C. P. McMillan, J. L. May, L. Kennedy, H. L. McLendon, E. P. Wightman, T. J. Griffin, G. A. Jolley, A. H. Thurmond, D. A. Bragg, M. M. Stephens, A. J. McDonald, S. M. Walker, N. N. Littlefield, and F. M. Grady. Several of these brethren have been full of good works, which they did. The fidelity and perseverance in self-sacrificial labors of Deacon L. Kennedy are worthy of special mention. In these labors he was seconded by his faithful and devoted wife. Bro. Kennedy served well as a deacon, and won for himself a high degree of merit and commendation.

Among the clerks of the church are M. M. Elsworth, the first clerk, J. H. Twyman, E. P. Wightman, J. L. McCoy, S. M. Whitehead, S. W. Mitchell, and G. A. Jolly.

The number of members continued around sixty up to the year 1900, when the church united with the Little River Association. The church was impeded in its growth by many causes, among which were the poverty of its members, its lack of strong and unified leadership, the poor selection of its building site, and other causes. For the first five or six years of its existence, worship was held in a "perpendicular slab shack" in an out of way part of town. Many hardships and difficulties were encountered. Moral looseness, profanity, drunkenness, and other forms of social evil characterized the life of the growing non-descript aggregation of mortals composing the shack-town city of Fitzger-
aid, which bore much more resemblance to Babel than to the New Jerusalem. The social and religious environment of the first members were by no means felicitous or edifying. They lived in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Sin reigned. Fitzgerald presented a medley of ideals, purposes, plans, peoples, and occupations. Liquor was sold in quantities, and the foundations for religious growth were weak.

In July, 1898, Rev. James F. Eden visited Fitzgerald, during the pastorate of Rev. J. F. Culpepper. Mrs. Dr. E. J. Dorminey served the aged traveler a royal Birthday dinner. The church at that time was worshipping in the recently erected frame house of worship, which was still in an incomplete condition. Bro. L. Kennedy, formerly of Savannah, and at that time a leading attorney of Fitzgerald, was superintendent of a flourishing Sunday school. Brother Millington had returned to his northern home, but Bro. Herrington, who had baptized about fifty in the city was still residing in Fitzgerald. Elegant brick stores were being erected in the growing colony city, known by many as the magic city of the Pines. J. H. Twyman was an earnest worker in the church during these times. In the autumn of 1898, Rev. B. J. W. Graham held a Bible Institute in the church. Rev. Elam Culpepper of Cordele, assisted his son, the pastor, in a meeting. The congregations were steadily increasing, and the church, though financially weak, was growing in membership. Bro. Culpepper resigned his work in Fitzgerald in October, 1898, to accept the church at Ashburn. He left the church in better condition and hopeful for the future. D. B. Jay was one of the leading spirits in the body, and he cherished bright hopes for the growing church.

In the spring of 1900 the church removed its building to a more convenient location near the center of the city, having secured two of the most desirable lots in Fitzgerald.

Rev. A. L. Blizzard assumed charge of the pastorate in the beginning of 1901, having resigned work at Lumpkin. The ladies of the church had ordered new pews, and the brethren were at work on the building. A coat of paint was added to the exterior. A new railroad, a new bank, and a number of other new enterprises had come to the city. The pastor of the church was paid every Monday morning. D. B. Jay, L. Kennedy, and Dr. Twyman were among the leading members. The members were led forward by Bro. Blizzard to substantial results. Forty-five members were received into the church during the year 1901, under his enthusiastic leadership and preaching. The W. M. S. engaged in quilting parties for the purpose of raising funds during these early days of the history of the church.

Rev. C. W. Minor succeeded Bro. Blizzard in the early days of the year 1903. During the first six months of his pastorate forty-one were received into the fellowship of the church, a portion of whom came in under the preaching of Rev. G. W. Argabrite, who aided Bro. Minor in a meeting. The church, which had in the year 1902 given only ten dollars for foreign missions had within five months of the year 1903 given eighty-three dollars. Bro. Minor characterized the City of Fitzgerald as “Progressive but sinful.” He spoke of his flock as the “Faithful few.” He stated that he went to Fitzgerald with fear and trembling, but he witnessed the manifestation of the power of God upon the work of his hands. Bro. Minor was very popular among all classes while at Fitzgerald. He aided in
the development of the country churches and was widely known all over the section. He has held some very prominent pastorates and positions in Georgia Baptist mission and Educational life since he left the Fitzgerald pastorate.

Rev. T. G. Davis was pastor for a time in Fitzgerald, Rev. J. I. Oxford resided in the city during a portion of his pastorate, but was later elected financial agent of the Bunn Bell Institute at Waycross. Bro. Davis resigned the care of the church in August, 1907, to accept the pastorate of the Roan Street Church, Johnson City, Tenn. He was very successful in his work in Fitzgerald. Rev. S. J. Parrish was his successor at Fitzgerald, coming from the Glenn Street church, Atlanta. He had formerly been connected with the Methodist ministry. The church increased in membership under his pastoral care.

Rev. L. W. Parrott described Fitzgerald as being one of the most interesting and remarkable of the cities of Georgia. People from all sections of the north and south and from all sections of Georgia were represented in the city. All creeds, all secret orders, all kinds of people, and all kinds of residence architecture could be found there, said he.

During the pastorates of brethren Tiler, Blizzard, Minor and Davis, there was considerable growth by baptism and by letter, chiefly the latter. Eighty were received by baptism and 253 by letter during these years. During the two year pastorate of Rev. S. J. Parrish 56 were received by baptism and 63 by letter, bringing the total membership to 352.

Under the pastorate of Rev. T. M. Calloway 54 were received by baptism and 185 by letter, bringing the total to 488 in 1913. During the pastorate of Rev. L. A. Cooper, 97 were received by baptism and 98 by letter, bringing the total to 531, in 1916. The total was only 499 at the close of 1917, under the pastorate of Rev. S. J. Baker.

During the last eighteen years about 300 have been received by baptism, while about 600 have been received by letter. During the pastorate of Rev. L. A. Cooper, the number received by baptism was about equal to the number received by letter. This speaks well for the evangelistic power of his ministry. To his predecessor, Rev. T. M. Calloway, he was indebted for much patient pastoral care and executive work expended upon the growing church.

Bro. Calloway's labors are still bearing fruit today.

Prominent among the members of the Fitzgerald church, who have been identified with the work of the church practically from its origin, and whose consecration and whole-hearted devotion to its interests have elevated them to a position of universal admiration and esteem are Mr. and Mrs. L. Kennedy, Mr. and Mrs. E. P. Wightman, and Mrs. E. J. Dorminey. It would be difficult to estimate the beneficial results throughout South Georgia of the self-sacrificial labors of these, and of others, who might be mentioned, C. P. McMillan, L. Kennedy, D. B. Jay, T. J. Griffin, G. A. Jolly, and others have made themselves felt in the lives of the young people of the church and of the city through their labors in the Sunday school and other departments of the church work. Chiefly under the leadership of Rev. T. F. Callaway.

The present house of worship of the Fitzgerald church was erected in 1913, Mr. and Mrs. M. W. Garbutt (whose membership was not in the church) L. Kennedy and E. T. Jaines being among the largest contributors to its building fund. Although the
members of the Fitzgerald Baptist church are not
so wealthy per capita as the members of some of
the other churches of the city, nevertheless wor-
ship is now held in the most handsome church build-
ing in the city, and this building is beautifully lo-
cated on the most prominent street in Fitzgerald.
“It has been said by many prominent Baptists of
the state that the membership of this church has
put more money into the Lord's treasury, accord-
ing to its wealth, than any church in the state.”

The present house of worship is valued at $40,000
and is admirably equipped for modern graded Sun-
day school work. The Fitzgerald church leads all
the other churches of the Little River Association
in gifts to the various benevolent enterprises, and
is one of the leading churches of the state. It has
experienced a steady growth during the last two
decades, and it may be said that this growth is both
substantial and permanent.

The Sunday school has been a prominent feature
and factor in the growth and development of the
church. To the labors of its faithful and conse-
crated teachers and officers may be attributed a
large portion of the prosperity and increase of the
church. The Sunday school has an interesting his-
tory also. The first Sunday school was organized

Bro. J. H. Twyman was the first Sunday school
superintendent, Bro. D. B. Jay also served one year.
But the work of the Sunday school has chiefly de-
veloped under the care of Bro. L. Kennedy, who
for about fifteen years most laboriously and faith-
fully and successfully carried on the work.

The Sunday school experienced a steady growth
under his leadership. In 1901 the enrollment was
51; in 1905 160; in 1907 235; in 1913 350. At least
115 were baptized from among the membership of
the Sunday school during the time he was super-
intendent, and perhaps a much larger number. This
number, however, was reported to the association.

The W. M. S. of the Fitzgerald church has ex-
perienced a marvelous growth in numbers and liber-
ality during the last twenty years. Mrs. E. J. Dor-
miney, Mrs. E. P. Wightman, Mrs. M. W. Garbutt,
Mrs. T. J. Luke, Mrs. L. Kennedy, Mrs. J. B. Wall,
and other noble spirits have made the Fitzgerald
W. M. S. most prominent in the association.

The First Baptist Church of Fitzgerald now stands
among the leading churches of the state. It suc-
cessfully and admirably entertained the Georgia
Baptist Convention in 1915, and in the summer of
1919 it entertained the state B. Y. P. U. Convention.
The church was greatly benefitted by both conven-
tions. Especially was the B. Y. P. U. of the church
benefitted by the recent B. Y. P. U. Convention. It
has now decided to support two native workers on
the foreign fields, one in Africa and one in China.

In securing Rev. J. F. Singleton as pastor, the
church has acquired a leader of ability, a preacher
of eloquence and power and an organizer with a
record of success behind him. He was given up by
the Statesboro church with great reluctance. He is
considered by his present flock to be in every man-
ner admirably adapted to the work of the church.

The present membership of the church is 510.
Under the leadership of Rev. J. F. Singleton the
church is going forward to greater victories. The
Sunday school under the leadership of J. T. Griffin
gave last year to all causes $545. About four-fifths
of this amount was for benevolent objects. This
Sunday school has the largest average attendance
in the Little River Association. The W. M. S. under
The leadership of Mrs. E. J. Dorminey gave nearly $2000 to all causes last year.

The First Baptist church is now rapidly approaching the twenty-fifth anniversary of its organization. There is only one other church in South Georgia, perhaps, that has had so marvelous a growth except the church at Cordele. The Cordele church, however, did not encounter the obstacles that have been met by the Fitzgerald church. The heterogeneity and transient character of the population of Fitzgerald have militated against the work of the church. A period of marked growth in membership began with the pastorate of Bro. Calloway, and the growth in membership has been gradual, substantial, and permanent ever since. The church membership is rapidly approaching the 600 mark and the future of the church is as bright as the promises of God. The body has stood firm as an enemy of the liquor traffic and all its concomitant evils during the last two decades. Its ministers have preached the true gospel, its members have practiced a beautiful perseverance, and now the results of the labors of the early toilers are about to appear. All honor to those first brethren and sisters who entered the vineyard at the sixth hour and have toiled indefatigably during the heat and the burden of the day. As we survey the excellent attainments of the church of today we should breathe a prayer of gratitude for their faithfulness, their initiative and their persistency in the face of hardship and opposition.

May the Master bless the church with continued growth in unity, love, intelligence, and efficiency, and may this survey of the growth and development of the church lend encouragement to their efforts to attempt further advances.

The First Baptist Church of Fitzgerald, like the city in which it is located, has been characterized by a rapid, substantial, and permanent growth. A generation ago, the natives of the undeveloped country around the present site of Fitzgerald had little dreamed of a city of wealth and power arising in their midst. Where once the gopher and salamander made their homes, amid the pines and the wiregrass, may now be heard the rattle and din of traffic, and the voices of the money changers. Elegant school buildings, handsome church edifices, strong banking institutions, highly specialized commercial emporiums, and all the many concomitants of modern city life may be seen where once the silent piney woods barrens turned their faces to the sun.

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