



A. J. Kirkland

For twenty-two years Dr. A. J. Kirkland's hand guided the growth of Texas Baptist Institute-Seminary. He was born December 5, 1902 at Zavalla (Angelina County) Texas. His father, W. B. Kirkland, was a sawmiller and timberman. When his family became too large to support in this way, he turned to farming. W. B. and Fannie Kirkland were devout Baptists. He was ordained by the Zavalla Baptist Church and began a missionary activity which resulted in the organization of several churches in Angelina County. Later he moved with the family to Shelby County where he had bought a farm and continued his missionary and pastoral ministry there. You can catch

"saddle blanket" crappie today in the deep waters of Toledo Bend Lake which have covered the old farm place below Huxley. Dr. Kirkland's early education was very limited. He finished only the eighth grade because his school work was interrupted when he was 15 years old by the death of his father. But after entering the ministry, Dr. Kirkland studied four years in the Jacksonville Baptist Academy. Later he continued his education through correspondence courses from the Fundamental Baptist school in Fort Worth and from Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. In 1940, he arranged for courses of study under the direction of Dr. J. Louis Guthrie in the Missionary Baptist Seminary of Little Rock. The Seminary awarded him a Doctor of Bible Languages degree in May, 1942.

THE CALL OF THE COURTROOM

Dr. Kirkland's earliest ambition was to be a lawyer. Center was the county seat of Shelby County, and when the family made their weekly trips to town, Dr. Kirkland went first to the courthouse to hear the trials, sometimes spending the whole day there. The family always knew to look for him there first when time came to go home. He nourished this ambition to be a lawyer until about 19 years old when he became convinced God had called him to preach. Those in later years who saw his keen logical mind and rapier wit at work on the debate platform can well imagine how formidable he would have been in the courtroom arguing a case.

NEW DIRECTIONS

On December 2, 1923, he married Anna Loree Nelson of Huntington. He was working on the railroad at the time, "sniping" he called it—keeping up the track, fixing rails, keeping cross-ties in place. After making known his call to preach to the Odell Baptist Church of Huntington in 1924, he continued his railroad work until spring, then took up farming. But his pastor, John White, urged him to give up farming and give his life fully to the ministry if he ever expected to be of great use to the Lord. Recognizing the wisdom of that advice, Dr. and Mrs. Kirkland moved to Jacksonville where he would begin his education for the work of the ministry. He was licensed to preach by the Odell church, but ordained by the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville in 1927. For the first year and a half of his ministry he did not pastor, but preached in rural churches, mostly in Angelina County. In 1926, he was called to some rural churches which met only one Sunday in the month. Among them was the Ebenezer church near Henderson, which gave him the first automobile he ever owned. It was during this time, too, that he first met A. H. Waldrop, later an attorney in Henderson, but then a school teacher in the New Salem community in Rusk County. Mr. Waldrop met Dr. Kirkland's train at Reklaw and drove him to the New Salem community to preach. That first meeting was to deepen into friendship in later years. Closing four years of study at Jacksonville (1929), he was called to the Walnut Street Baptist Church of Hillsboro. Those were depression times. Hill county was cotton county, and the bottom had fallen out of the cotton market. People were poor and had no way to travel. Since so many could not come to hear him preach, Dr. Kirkland devised a plan to take

the gospel to them. With the help of the church, he built a platform, equipping it with lighting, and provided benches for outdoor meetings. And he began holding meetings all over Hill county. No records are available, but hundreds made professions of faith in Christ. The Walnut Street church continued to grow steadily. An old newspaper clipping from the Hillsboro daily paper reported that in the 6½ years of Dr. Kirkland's ministry there, 678 persons were added to the Walnut Street church. Pastorates followed in Ennis, White Oak (Longview), and Corsicana.

THE CHALLENGE AT HENDERSON

Calvary Baptist Church of Henderson called Dr. Kirkland in 1950 to the pastorate of the church and the presidency of Texas Baptist Institute. For two years both the church and school had been under the able and dedicated leadership of R. E. Rodgers. The church was 3½ years old, its building unfinished, with considerable debt when Dr. Kirkland came. The following seven years were to be filled with some of the hardest work he had ever done in his ministry. With limited finances to hire additional help, he edited the Baptist Monitor, pastored the church, led it through an expansion program, traveled across the state to raise money for the Institute, bought property for it, and erected the present administration building. With the church and the Institute growing, he felt compelled in 1956 to resign the pastorate of the church and to give his full time to the work of the school. The next 16 years were to be consumed by diligent service in behalf of the school. Additional property purchases, houses moved onto the property, five new dormitories, a new library facility - all these stand as a monument to Dr. Kirkland's faith, foresight, energy, and leadership. He looked upon Texas Baptist Institute -Seminary as the crowning work of his long ministry. God chose to call him away from this work on February 23, 1972.