

INTERPRETING CHURCH MINUTES

Arthur L. Walker, Jr.*

Every historian wants the best sources. He knows too that these sources must be classified as either primary or secondary. A primary source is material written by the man being studied or material which was written during the period under observation. It is material giving first-hand information. Anything else must be considered a secondary source. Of course, even primary sources must be evaluated. Not all of them will have value for a writer. Secondary sources are those written *about* the subject of study. These must always be used carefully because they may reflect only the interpretation of the writer.

For the local church historian, church minutes are the primary source. There will be other primary sources but the minutes will be the natural starting point. They will give the picture of the activities of the church from the point of view of the official actions of the church. Some statements in church minutes are either intentionally or unintentionally ambiguous. This means of course, they must be interpreted.

The cardinal principle of all historical interpretation is to avoid reading into a statement or action a meaning which it did not convey originally. A misrepresentation is not an interpretation.

Interpretation must always conform with accepted principles of the critical approach. One must begin by determining if there is material which was not a part of the source originally. This is fairly easily accomplished in many of the older, handwritten minutes by such obvious differences as different handwriting, pen, or ink. In some cases, however, a greater problem is found when the minutes have been recopied. Not all of the scribes were such careful historians as Hosea Holcombe, who, upon copying the minutes of the Canaan Baptist Church of Bessemer, Alabama, made it very clear those parts which were his own corrections and comments.

In typewritten copies emendations can be discovered by comparison with other materials. These, of course, would include local newspapers, personal diaries, legal documents, and other materials of the same type.

In the matter of interpretation there is also the problem of determining the meaning of statements which are found. In some minutes this problem will be created by the use of words now obsolete or phrases with a specialized meaning. This is especially true in regard to movements which created a problem at some bygone time. A clear illustration of this is the use of the term "benevolent societies." The minutes of the Ruhama Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama, for August, 1834, tell of a problem which arose in the church where there was a discussion of "benevolent societies." In the course of the discussion, one of the brothers said in essence, "Those who feel as I do concerning these societies get up and walk out." Twenty-eight walked out. Except for the phrase "benevolent societies" we would be left only to guess the problem under discussion. This phrase, though, clearly indicates that the split came over the question of missions.

A similar problem of interpretation occurs in relationship to the Mount Zion Baptist Church (now considered to be the Newbern Baptist Church) of Greensboro, Alabama. There a problem arose centering around the pastor, a Brother Wells. The church withdrew fellowship from him in 1831. No indication is given concerning the nature of the problem concerning Brother Wells. However, in the state Baptist paper for that period, Wells was accused of being an exponent of McKeeism. A history of the Baptist work in the state written by B. F. Riley defines McKeeism, and tells the historian that the problem was related to a particular interpretation of Christology current in the 1830's.

Not only do terms create problems but in dealing with churches and associations one must be careful to notice differences in spelling. The historian must not be misled by some differences which reflect only misspelled names rather than different names. He must also be able to recognize a slight difference in the name used. The oldest Baptist association in the southern part of Alabama, now the Bethlehem Association, has been both the Beckbee and Bigbee Association. This Bigbee also was spelled by some Bigby.

One other area of interpretation must also be considered. This is related to what is generally called the tests of competence. What opportunities did the writer have to know the facts, or was the writer partial? It must be remembered in every dispute the church clerk will be on one side or the other. His interpretation of the dispute, therefore, will naturally be biased.

With these general statements as a background, it will be of value to turn to some areas which occur repeatedly in church minutes. These are the discipline trials, membership rolls, unusual official actions, and the change or changes in the way in which the minutes were kept.

Discipline trials are very revealing. Far more than simply telling the event, for the historian these trials have very real value. For instance, the trial will give some names of those who were members of the church at a particular time. In many of the older records this is important because the church roll was kept separately and in many cases has been lost. The constant change involved in bringing records up to date may have made these records worthless. The trial will reveal the names of those tried, those bringing the charges, those who are named to visit the erring and those who spoke as witnesses.

In church discipline trials much is revealed about the church, its pastor, and the character of the community. The incidence with which a certain "crime" is mentioned will give an indication of social conditions. It will also give an indication of the emphasis of the church; giving some insight into the theological emphases as well as the practical emphases made in the life of the particular church.

Perhaps more than any other part of church records the discipline trial reveals the character of the community. In those areas where the trials center around horse-racing, the misdeeds of the slaves, other activities which would reveal landed gentry and gentle living, one immediately sees evidence of social conditions. In other areas the types of dances which were frequented by erring members, the description of the types of spirited beverages consumed and the economic conflicts of members would reveal an entirely different social background.

One other interesting area in which discipline trials would be of value could be called the attitude toward events outside the church. For instance, the records of the Rockford Baptist Church of Rockford, Alabama, tell of the trial of a brother for desertion from the army of the Confederacy. In reality the charge brought was that by so deserting the brother had violated the oath taken by volunteers. The fact that so much emphasis was placed on this charge, that it was considered repeatedly from August of 1862 until March of 1863, gives a very good picture of the attitude of this particular church and community in regard to the conflict in which the nation was then involved. This matter was settled in March, 1863, when the church withdrew fellowship from the deserting soldier.

Church membership rolls also offer revealing facts. The number of people moving in or out of a community indicates population shifts. Yet, if there is a number of people who are dismissed or a number who are received into fellowship, this could reveal dissension, dispute, conflict within the church, or, on the other hand, conflict within a neighboring church, a portion of whose members transfer their membership to the local situation. The reception of a large number of members also might indicate successful revivals.

The membership rolls often serve as the only indication as to the tenure of the respective pastors. Many church clerks neglect to mention the resignation and the call of a pastor. At the same time, many of these pastors simply supplied from time to time. So it is likely that there would be further need for study even though the name of a particular pastor occurs constantly on the roll of a particular local church.

Membership rolls may be important in providing information about particular individuals or families. If a membership roll is kept correctly it would indicate the death of an individual. This date gives a clue to be used in the search for further information. The local newspaper probably carried an obituary. For those very active in the state religious life, the state religious newspaper likely would have an obituary. Courthouse records, other legal documents and state convention minutes would be sources to check using dates found in membership rolls.

One of the most interesting yet most difficult areas which the historian may find necessary to interpret would be unusual actions on the part of the church. When the church took a stand which seemed out of keeping with precedents in its own life or unusual in relationship to what is usually expected of a Baptist body, the historian often must interpret the meaning of such actions. This action might involve unusual meetings, a time for meeting out of the ordinary, dismissal of members in a way different from the usual practice, and resolutions reflecting an unusual stand. The official actions of the church usually do not have an adequate explanation in the records; consequently one must find from the events preceding or following such action clues to the real meaning.

Interpreting the change of the way in which minutes were kept may give a key to affairs not otherwise mentioned in the records. An illustration of this point comes from the record of the Newbern Church which considers itself the reconstituted Mt. Zion Church. In the early days of its history the record of the joining of a colored member was given as being with the permission of the owner. Later on "with permission of" was omitted. This naturally reflects a change of attitude in the community toward slave membership. At this time also slight mentions are made of separate services being held for the colored members. In the latter months of 1865 and following colored members are referred to as "the late servant of ----" with the name of the former owner. These changes take on real significance when one notices that at no place in the minutes of the Newbern Church is there a mention of the conflict of 1861-1865. There are gaps in the minutes indicating months for which no church conferences were held, or conferences for which there were no minutes, but there is absolutely no mention of the war. The historian, however, sees reflected the attitude of the community particularly in regard to slavery and emancipation and with only slight interpretation the whole attitude toward the cause of the Confederacy.

The local church historian must interpret his sources as any other historian would do. As is true with all primary sources much is reflected which could not be found in secondary sources. It is the task of the church historian to take advantage of all the information at his disposal. This he can do with a proper interpretation of the church minutes.

*At the time the above article was written, Dr. Walker was editor of this publication.

(At the present time he is Executive Director-Treasurer, Education Commission Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee.)

Where do I get the information for my church history? That is one of the most common questions raised by church historians. In the next five articles many sources are suggested for your research and recommendations are made for their proper use. The articles are:

"Interpreting Church Minutes," Arthur L. Walker, Jr.

"Baptist Periodicals in Alabama, 1835-1873," F. Wilbur Helmbold

"The Use of Secular Newspapers in Writing Church History," Quentin Porch.

Shaking a Few History Trees, Lee N. Allen.

"Non-Church Sources of Information" Mattie Lou Teague Crow.

Church records are the starting point for any history. Fortunate is the historian who has a reasonably complete set of church records. Although requiring some ingenuity and hard work, preparation of a history is not impossible even when the church does not have a single document.

The basic church record is the church clerk's account of the business sessions (church conferences). Other important documents include the church roll, financial records, minutes of the WMU, church bulletins, the agenda and announcements from Wednesday evening, minutes from committee meetings, and various promotional pieces. The dedicated historian gathers every shred of material offered and draws every possible inference.

Beyond church records, the historian looks at associational records. These are printed reports of the annual meeting of Baptist churches of the area that contain statistics of the church and the names of certain officers of each church. Note the relative position of your church in the association in each category; take special note when it changes significantly and try to analyze the cause of such a change.

Newspapers, both denominational and secular, are often gold mines of information. Using them is time-consuming. Some libraries maintain clipping files which can assist the researcher. A few periodicals are indexed. At Samford University, *The Alabama Baptist* has been indexed for the years since 1957 and is being indexed from the paper's beginning in 1843. At this writing the indexing has been completed well into the 1880s. Some of the other states have indexing projects under way.

Oral history is a valuable tool for obtaining information which never found its way into documents, is useful for filling in when documentation is lacking, and helps to add personalized details. Oral history is a specialized field of research, and not everyone does it well. The technique of recording oral history includes asking the right questions without prompting, and knowing the material being discussed well enough to ask probing follow-up questions. For more detailed discussion of oral history, see article entitled "Writing Baptist History: Using Oral History Interviews."

In general it is best to interview each person separately. On one occasion, however, I assembled a remarkable group of old-timers at my home and got them to discuss the church some fifty to sixty years earlier, an era for which there was not a single surviving church record. I threw out some general questions and let them talk around on the topics. Occasionally someone would challenge a statement, and they would discuss the matter until they had arrived at a consensus that I believed to be an accurate recollection. This is an "iffy" technique which worked for me only once. The group of four or five must all be congenial with one another, be of sound mind, and not include anyone who will dominate the conversation.

In Dr. Walker's article are some practical suggestions for avoiding pitfalls in using church records. A researcher must be careful not to project his own period back into history. This sometimes involves understanding vocabulary, usually requires applying common sense, and necessitates an appreciation of the greater value of the dollar in the period under discussion.

I read a statement in the 1820s or 1830s about a church "concert" on a Monday evening. This was at a small rural church, and I could not imagine what singer or musicians would be giving a recital. After further study, I learned that in that era churches held a monthly "concert of prayer for foreign missions" eventually shortened to "concert."

In preparing the history of a prominent church, I read a published history that reported that the church had voted \$1,500 to help found another church in the same town. Since that was about 1871, the depths of Reconstruction in the South, I found it hard to imagine how the church could possibly come up with that much money. Although difficult to make meaningful translations of the value of money from one century to another, their commitment might be comparable to a gift of \$100,000 in 1987 dollars. From all I knew about the economy of that era, anything near that amount was totally unrealistic. Fortunately, the original church record was extant. On checking it, I discovered a faint, barely legible, period, which transformed the gift into a believable \$15.00. Even that amount was generous for that day, but not unbelievable.

A term still used by church clerks, but which is alien to the ear of most church members, is "erasure." It sounds like something done by Chicago mobsters. In fact, it is a technical term for the removal of a name from the roll when a member leaves the denomination. Check with authorities when terminology does not make sense.

In her article on non-church sources of information, Mattie Lou Crow shows how a historian must take every clue and follow each lead even through the courthouse. It is a good idea to use the record of transactions, even if you think you know where every building was located. A document might reveal some information that you did not know, such as the names of the trustees of the church or the ownership of a bequest that you had not heard about.

Lee N. Allen