

## NOTES ON THE PREPARATION OF A LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY

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As a Baptist I have noted the deep preoccupation Baptists have with their history. Baptists and Baptist history go together. We feel that it provides insight to both present and future.

The writing of Baptist history over the decades has suffered rather severely due to the lack of adequate resource material on the level of the local church. There are good histories of the beginning of Baptist life in the nation; there are some excellent studies on the diversity of the denominational structure and development of national and regional organizations. There are many good state Baptist histories including the Baptist histories of the state of Alabama. There are many excellent associational histories which deal with the movement of Baptist churches in the local association. The problem is that we do not have adequate local history, that is history of the local Baptist church. We claim to be primarily people of the local church and yet our historical efforts have concentrated not on the local church but on the combination of churches representing associations or conventions. In reality, the history of the local church must be the starting point of all denominational history. The local church is the foundation of the denominational structure; it represents the beginning point in our understanding of what happens throughout the denomination.

Our approach to history has been much like the approach of school systems seeking to be accredited, whereby they put the best teachers in the high schools and put the uncertified teachers in the lower grades; and the teachers with the poorest preparation they put in the first grade. It should be just the opposite, for the foundation is the important part. Unfortunately, as Baptists we have glorified the convention or associational history and have rather offhandedly dismissed the local church history. This tendency must be reversed, for the local church history is that history which gives the flavor, the temper, to history. It is that instrument which will indicate to the historian of the broader subject the real feelings of the people involved in the great movements which sometimes sweep the denomination. Therefore, local history must be emphasized and its writing must be upgraded. It is with this in mind that we approach the subject today: How to write a local church history.

First consideration is given to the organizational structure in preparing a local church history. Second, the writing of the history, and finally the printing or publication of this history.

There are three kinds of local Baptist history: first that which never gets compiled and written, second that which gets compiled and written but never printed and distributed and third, that which is compiled and written, printed and distributed. Naturally the aim of all historical effort on the local level is to bring to pass some printed and distributed presentation of the history of the church which will be used to further understand the church.

Usually the church history which is compiled, written and printed will be produced by the church which has first an interested historian-author, a supportive pastor, and a strong historical committee.

Most churches have at least one person who has the interest and the desire to see the church history published. Most of those who fall into this group are willing to do the work themselves, that is, willing to pay the price in terms of physical and mental labor. Yet, this alone will not be sufficient for the publication of a good church history. The need for support from the pastor of the church should be obvious. Few historians are of sufficient influence in the church to bring the full support of the church to their project. If the pastor of the church does not seem interested, then it is the first task of the author or would-be church historian to devise a means whereby the pastor will swing his support to the side of actively pursuing a church history. Most pastors can be persuaded as follows: first, show him how a history of a church could be utilized in reaching out to win others to the Lord. Show him that those who seek a church with a long and distinguished history identify with this kind of approach and will be more likely to join his church. Second, one might approach the pastor on this basis, that the historical aspect of the church will certainly lead up to the present day and with a good ending the pastor himself -can certainly appear well in print. One might begin by going to the pastor with his camera and asking the pastor to pose for several different types of exposures with the understanding that at least two or three of these exposures will appear in the finished work. Finally, if the appeal to his spiritual life or appeals to his vanity do not work, one may begin to make himself a nuisance to the pastor with the understanding that the pastor very clearly knows why this person is being a nuisance. Most pastors are rather insecure in many ways; therefore, a nuisance constitutes a threat. Most anything will be

attempted in order to clear away a threat to the security of the pastor; therefore, by making oneself into a sufficient pest, the pastor might very well be persuaded to support the work.

Of equal importance is a historical committee for the church which will give guidance in two ways. First it should give its support to the writing project, that is, encouraging people to submit material to the writers, securing records for the writers and helping to prepare the manuscript in general. Secondly, the committee should take responsibility for seeing that the history is placed in print. This should not be the duty of the writer. The reason for this is obvious. In most cases where there is no committee, and the writer undertakes the project simply as a personal labor of love, the writer is placed in the embarrassing position of trying to sell his own work to the church. This should not be. The committee should undertake the full responsibility of seeing to it that sufficient money is raised for printing cost and for publication and distribution and sales of the book. Naturally, the writer will have the privilege of dispensing copies of the book which is a privilege most authors enjoy, but it is a rare writer who would enjoy the responsibility of selling all the copies of the book. Let this be the responsibility of the committee.

The second broad area has to do with the writing of the manuscript, and sources of information. The obvious place to begin a church history is with any material which might have been compiled and printed about the church. Previous brochures or histories should be consulted but should not constitute the basis of the written material which the current work will cover. Then the writer should go to the minutes of the church. Every effort possible should be made to obtain the full run of minutes for the church. Particularly if the minutes are old and handwritten the writer should be very careful that he thoroughly familiarizes himself with the style of handwriting so that he does not miscopy those matters which he finds in the early minutes. Usually it is more a matter of deciphering than reading and extreme caution should be used in copying old minutes to be sure that it is copied exactly. Also, one needs to understand that many of the minutes were kept by church clerks who did not really care for their jobs. Often the minutes will not be accurate; many of the membership lists will not be accurate. People will still be listed as members of the church who have long been deceased. Care must be taken that the information received from the minutes is accurate. One should carefully check the minutes for such items as decisions on financing and building, pastors, any statement concerning doctrine or belief of any kind which might add flavor and understanding to the history. From the church minutes, the writer will want to obtain certain lists to be included in the writing of the book. It is a good idea to have at least these lists: first, the pastors; secondly, licensed ministers or ministers ordained and licensed by the church, ordained deacons of the church and if possible a membership list which will include the date the person joined the church and the date of his decease or transfer out of the church.

One should consider bulletins and newsletters as an important source and the minutes can be checked against these. Besides local material another source should be the associational record. Again an integral part of the history of the church is the relationship with the other churches in the association. Particular care should be noted in the officers of the association, checking for pastors or members of the church who held office in the association. This information should be included in the finished product. Another excellent source of local information are county newspapers or local town newspapers. The weekly newspapers published in the 1800's and the early 1900's in most of the counties of the state contain very long items about the churches and their activities and often contain extensive articles on decision or disruption or disagreement in the churches. It would be unfortunate if this rich source of Baptist historical material were left untapped.

The writer should also check on other histories of the area in which the church is located. A county or city history will usually include some information about the various churches. Additional sources might be the state Baptist papers, especially if indexed. If the church is very old, previous state histories might include a list of churches. Finally, the author should with care and discretion ascertain information from those who have been participants in the development of the church down through the years. One of the most useful sources of information on the lives of pastors will be the people who knew them and followed their careers. Certainly one would want to include in the history of the church any notable achievement for which a former pastor received recognition.

In writing the work it should be noted that there are many different styles of writing, but a local history should contain a narrative. Certainly there should be lists. The writer should strive to achieve a balance of narrative part and in factual data in the lists. The writer should include some useful details which might provide for those interested in genealogical or historical research basic facts, elsewhere difficult to ascertain. As far as the writing style of the narrative is concerned, one would want to do the very best he knows how and then utilize the best resources possible to bring his style into publishable form. The most useful bit of information I might add here is that there are many

people who, for the opportunity of doing something for their friends or for reasonable fees, would be more than happy to carefully go over the manuscript before it is submitted to a printer or publisher, to edit it in terms of writing style, grammatical style and spelling. An English teacher in the local high school or junior college in the state or someone with experience in editing or preparing copy for print, is usually a good source for this kind of help. The writer should be aware that he does not attempt to persuade others to accept the manuscript *as he wrote it*. One seldom sees *his own mistakes* in writing style or grammatical structure.

The final subject which we should like to cover very briefly is the publication of the finished products. As stated before, this should be the responsibility of the committee: the historical committee of the church. Here the committee should be aware of the distinction between a publisher and a printer. A printer will simply take the manuscript presented and set it in type and print the pages, bind it and return it to be sold. A publisher on the other hand will attempt to edit the manuscript, to put in saleable form, and to make it more digestible as far as public consumption is concerned. He will attempt to make the format of the book as attractive as possible while at the same time attempting to be as economical as possible. He will also usually help to sell the work. The church history committee must determine whether or not they need a publisher or printer. The decision should be based on the resources available to the church. If the writer of the history has utilized all of the available resources including high level grammatical consultation, experienced editorial help, perhaps some experienced printing and publishing advisement, then a printer will do. If, on the other hand, the writer and the committee have simply attempted to put together the best they knew how and are not sure about the format of the work, then they need a publisher who will work with them, advise them how to rewrite and redesign and redo the material and mold it into a form which will be a credit to the subject matter. The committee will then want to assess the time element involved. If the material goes to a printer then in a reasonably short time it should be back. If a publisher is to be used then the committee must allow a much greater length of time for the completion of the work.

The final item that I should like to mention is this one vital element of time. It took a long time for the church to make a history; it takes time to write a good local church history; it takes time to prepare it; it takes time to print or publish it, and it will take some time to sell it. Patience is advised. Advance planning, including plenty of time, is the wisest move that a church history committee can make. If I were to leave one piece of lasting advice with you, it would be simply this: plan well in advance of the time that you anticipate distribution and sales of the history. It is far better that the books spend six months wrapped in boxes awaiting that great anniversary date, than that they should not appear on the scene until six weeks after the anniversary has past.

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*Dr. Joe D. Acker's article is an introduction to the writing of a church history. Several points need emphasis. Without the wholehearted support of the pastor, a church historical project will seldom succeed. A history committee usually has more success than a single individual in enlisting the full support of the entire church.*

*Writing of the history should be entrusted to one person, but that person's research and writing must be subject to review by both the history committee and a trained editor. Editing is a highly specialized task and does not necessarily accompany a college degree. That is to say, a high school or college English teacher may not be an editor at heart and may not do the job as well as someone who has an eye for the most minute details.*

*A special point of emphasis is the need for ample time in the preparation of the history. A centennial history might well require more than a year of full-time research and writing, and much more for the person who has never done any formal research in Baptist history and who may have to work on a part-time basis. The church that does not give the author ample time cheats itself out of a first-class history.*

*Lee N. Allen*