

BAPTIST HISTORY IN STATISTICAL TABLES

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Brief experience has led me to believe that the preparation of statistical tables can offer invaluable aid in writing Baptist history. From the annual minutes of the association, from newspaper stories, and elsewhere tables can be prepared depicting the annual changes in the churches of the association. As a minimum this should include the number of baptisms in each congregation, the number of members received by letter, the number dismissed, the number restored, the number excluded, with a breakdown of the causes for exclusion, if possible, and the number of deaths in each congregation. Such a table reveals at a glance a panoramic view of changes in the churches. When this is correlated with the second table showing the total number of churches in the association or region, their total membership, the number of their members, with a breakdown into white and Negro members, if both races are present, and the number of licensed and ordained ministers, statistics may be drawn showing the relative changes in the entire association and the proportionate influence of the respective churches.

So often a study of this type will reveal the source and the nature of much of the energy which has channeled Baptist development in an association and at times sections of an entire state. Additional tables can be prepared showing the years of admission and dismissal of churches in the association. So often this information can be used to clarify theological changes as when antimissionary churches are dismissed or withdraw from the association. It can indicate the nature of expansion of both a geographical and spiritual nature. It can reveal whether the creation of new associations is the result of natural expansion or internal dissension.

Tables showing the site of the annual association meeting and the principal officers, including at least the introductory speaker, the moderator, the clerk, and the treasurer are also most revealing. Given some knowledge of the views and the local accomplishments of these men, oftentimes one can visualize a pattern of development from these tables alone. When this is used in conjunction with listings of the principal pastorates held by the ministers of the association with their years of service one can draw even more conclusions as to the changes in the nature of the ministry. I believe this to be particularly important since, of all religious leaders, the Baptist minister enjoys a unique leadership over his flock. I believe that it will be found to be usually true that where the congregations have grown and flourished the ministry has been zealous and growing. The pattern of turnover in which the young, gifted ministers rise in the association reveals the emergence of leadership and the change in centers of influence and control.

Tables listing the men licensed and ordained each year and the congregations from which they come serve as an important barometer of which churches are most effectively doing their job and are most capable of doing it.

In closing may I suggest to you that a student of church history is not writing in a vacuum. The church is in, if not of, this world, therefore tables chronicling such things as the place and publisher of the annual minutes of the association are pertinent. They may indicate something of the economic and cultural developments of the region where the churches function. We can hope to write good history only when we integrate the picture of church development and the local, regional, and national developments of the time. When we begin to understand the role the church has played in various times and locales our labors will rise from antiquarian interests through the scientific study of history to that of a service agency for man's greatest mission, the conversion of the world.

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Statistics bore most people, and historians often do not know what to do with such information. In his article Dr. Bailey reminds historians that statistics tell valuable stories, if properly used.

Whenever I begin a new church history, I prepare a set of ruled sheets for recording statistics. On one set of pages I keep church membership statistics; on another, names of elected officers and, possibly, staff members; on another, budget and other financial information. Although I seldom reprint any of this information, I watch for

unusual increases or decreases, and then try to determine what occurred. At the end I go back and underline in red the high points and low and analyze these turning points. A logical explanation exists most of the time and is important.

A statistical table at the back of the book is helpful to the reader, but it is not necessary to include every year for most statistics. Church membership or budget figures every five or ten years is usually adequate to show the general trends.

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