

Editorial

In September 2004, I attended a meeting sponsored by the North American Mission Board to discuss matters related to denominational and church polity with leaders from several SBC entities. The topic of our conversation focused particularly upon developing church planting-ecclesiological guidelines that were both biblical and Baptist. All those attending believed that the church planting strategies of our denominational entities should embody the beliefs of Southern Baptists. Our primary concern was to establish broad guidelines that would assist NAMB in the development of church-planting guidelines to train church planters.¹

All participants realized the importance and implications of our conversations. Numerous items were addressed and debated. Although the overall climate of the meeting was cordial and fraternal, deeply held convictions were articulated with great intensity. After several hours of dialogue, a consensus of positions acceptable to all began to emerge. As a means of bringing our session to a close, the facilitator of the meeting (Dr. Ed Stetzer) solicited final comments and opinions from each person in the meeting. Addressing the last person at the table (who had said very little during the discussions), Dr. Stetzer asked, “Do you have any final comments or observations?” The man’s response, which was both humorous and insightful, can be paraphrased as follows: “When I first was asked to attend this meeting to discuss Baptist polity, I thought it would be about as exciting as watching paint dry. However, after several hours of

¹For the fruit of these conversations and meetings, see Stan Norman, *Ecclesiological Guidelines to Inform Church Planters*, Position Paper Submitted to Trustee Board, North American Mission Board, Alpharetta, Georgia, September 2004. A fully developed treatment of these issues is found in R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005).

listening to our discussion, I now see that Baptist polity is incredibly important and has profound implications for the ministry of our churches and our denomination.”

The remarks of my friend reflect the attitudes of many Baptists today. Few Baptists pay much attention to or seem overly concerned about matters of church polity. Many Baptists mistakenly believe that polity is a matter of church business meetings, budgets, and organizational schemes. Such a view of church polity is, however, misinformed and naïve. As noted elsewhere, polity can be defined as “the organization or government structure of a local church or fellowship of churches,”² or more simply as “a form of church government adopted by an ecclesiastical body.”³ As these two definitions indicate, polity involves governance and organization. The ultimate goal of a church polity should be to discern and implement the will of God for His people. Church polity, and for Baptists congregational polity, is the way in which a local church organizes and administrates its ministries in the quest of its mission. Understood in this way, church polity is quite important.

The following essays represent the majority of presentations given at the 2004 Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry Conference. The theme for the conference was “Issues in Baptist Polity.” The interest in and desire for these materials has been so strong, we decided to make them available in print.

The essays address Baptist polity from diverse perspectives. The role and identity of elder(s) in Baptist churches is analyzed in the articles written by Dr. Mark Dever, Dr. Gerald Cowen, and Dr. Robert Wring. Each brings a unique perspective on an issue of growing interest

²Millard J. Erickson, “Polity,” in *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

³Donald K. McKim, “Polity,” in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

(and controversy) in many Baptist churches. For example, Dr. Dever contends in his article “Baptist Polity and Elders” that elder-led (not elder-rule) is a biblically and theologically appropriate polity for Baptist churches, while Dr. Wring contends in his article (“Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Polity”) that an elder-based polity is a departure from the Bible and Baptist heritage. In his essay “The Elder and His Ministry,” Dr. Cowen provides a biblical examination of the identity and ministry of elders in New Testament churches.

The relationship between pastoral leadership and congregationalism is also analyzed in this edition of the *JBTM*. For example, Dr. Richard Land in his essay “Pastoral Leadership: Authoritarian or Persuasive?” contends that the congregationalism practiced in Baptist churches and authoritative pastoral leadership are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Dr. Land believes that congregational church polity can enhance strong pastoral leadership. Dr. Jim Henry, in his essay “Pastoral Reflections on Baptist Polity in the Local Church,” provides us a pastoral perspective upon the importance and role that church polity has upon the constitution and mission of the local church.

Several of our presenters explore various theological and historical facets of congregational church polity. Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr. in his essay “An Affirmation of Congregational Polity,” provides a succinct yet thorough biblical, historical, and theological overview of congregational polity. In addition, Dr. Garrett develops the theological significance of this form of church polity for the life and ministry of a local church. In his article “To Answer or Not To Answer”: A Case Study on the Emergence of the Stone-Campbell Movement amongst the Baptist Churches of Kentucky in the 1820s,” Dr. Rodrick Durst uses the case study method to examine the historical role that Baptist polity played in the controversial Stone-Campbell movement. Dr. John Hammett contends that Baptists in the twentieth century experienced a

theological shift in their understanding of congregational polity. In the essay “From Church Competence to Soul Competence: The Devolution of Baptist Ecclesiology,” Dr. Hammett argues that the biblical and Baptist emphasis should be the competency of the church as a corporate entity to discern the will of God, and not the highly individualistic emphasis of soul competency commonly found in so many Baptist churches. Dr. Malcolm Yarnell, in his article “Congregational Priesthood and the *Inventio* or Invention of Authority,” addresses the issue of church polity based upon two major premises. First, he offers a paradigm for understanding the problem of doctrinal development. This paradigm differentiates between true and false developments, *inventio* and invention. Second, his paradigm locates ecclesial authority in the congregational priesthood as the preferred doctrine of royal priesthood.

Two essays examine the implications of congregational polity upon various aspects of the mission of the church. Dr. John Sullivan, in the article “Baptist Polity and the State Convention,” uses an actual, recent event to explore the relationship between the local church and the state convention. With the heart of an evangelist, Dr. Alvin Reid analyzes the dynamics and implications of congregational church polity upon the evangelistic passions and practices of Baptist churches in the essay “Polity and Proclamation: The Relationship between Congregational Polity and Evangelistic Church Growth in the SBC.”

As we note on the front page of our website, the Baptist Center exists to provide theological and ministerial resources to enrich and energize ministry in Baptist churches. Our prayer is that the essays contained in this edition of the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* achieve this purpose.

Until He returns, may He find us faithful,

Stan Norman, Editor