

Editorial

The Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry was pleased to host its first annual conference February 5-7, 2004. The theme for this event was “Issues in Baptist Polity.” Prominent Baptist leaders from churches, seminaries, colleges, and denominational entities assembled on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to explore and discuss various issues regarding Baptist polity. The theological foundations and practical implications of church polity were considered and debated from diverse perspectives. The panel discussion following the banquet provided lighthearted banter, yet also produced fruitful conversation on numerous subjects of passionate interests to Baptists.

We believe that God greatly blessed this gathering. Interest surpassed all our expectations; conference registration and attendance exceeded threefold our planned projections. Churches sent leadership teams to be trained and informed on matters of immediate interest and relevance. Pastors and deacons came to learn better how to relate each other and to minister more effectively in their respective offices. Interest in the subject was high, and feedback was incredibly positive. Baptists apparently are still interested in and continue to struggle with issues of polity. We are hopeful that this event provided a platform for reflection and produced resources to assist Baptist churches in their ministries.

Because of the continued (if unstated) interest in this subject, this edition of the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* is devoted to the subject of Baptist polity. To dedicate an entire journal volume to this issue may seem to some unimportant, divisive, or irrelevant. Such attitudes, however, are naïve or uninformed. Polity can be defined generally as “the organization

or governmental structure of a local church or fellowship of churches,”¹ or as “a form of church government adopted by an ecclesiastical body.”² In a real sense, church polity is simply the manner in which a group of Christian believers structures itself to discern and implement the will of God. When defined and considered in this light, polity is vitally important for today’s Church.

An issue of immediate interest in Southern Baptist life is the role and function of elders in a Baptist church. The essays in this journal that address this issue reveal the diversity of opinions and perspectives found in Baptist life. The article written by Dr. Daryl Cornett provides a biblical and historical investigation of the nature and purpose of elders. His analysis compares and contrasts differing perspectives of elders between Baptists and Presbyterians. He also identifies and discusses what he believes are the essential, theological principles that a Baptist congregation must embody in order to have a biblically faithful polity. Dr. Phil Newton provides an historical overview on elders and their function in American Baptist polity. He suggests that some American Baptist churches had a plurality of elders as part of their polity. Although Baptist history provides a precedent for a plural-elder-polity, Dr. Newton contends that contemporary Baptists must ultimately construct their polity in accordance with biblical teaching. Dr. Benjamin Merkle investigates the use of the terms “elder” and “overseer” (or “bishop”) in the Pastoral Epistles in order to determine the precise relationship between these terms. He argues that Baptists affirm two extant offices for the church: deacons and pastors.

¹Millard J. Erickson, “Polity,” in *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

²Donald K. McKim, “Polity,” in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

Dr. Merkle maintains that the biblical terms for pastor and elder are synonymous concepts referring to the same ecclesiastic office.

In Baptist life, the regular business meetings of a local church invoke images of controversy and strife, often resulting in unpleasant and uncharitable ecclesiastic conflicts. Untold numbers of Baptist churches have experienced crises, hardships, and schisms. These problems are often perceived as arising from or as propagated by the “business meeting.” Because of the culture created by these gatherings, many Baptist churches have reduced in number or completely eliminated business meetings. Dr. Steve Echols presents a scholarly yet practical article for church leaders on the purpose and process of a business meeting. His essay contends that these events can be “pathways” for harmonious change when biblically grounded, carefully planned, and properly executed. Dr. Echols offers pastoral suggestions for reclaiming the “business meeting” as a vibrant and useful ministry for local churches.

The contribution of Rev. James Jenkins provides an insightful glimpse into the polity structures of Baptist African American churches. He attempts to dispel the myth that African American pastors wield unlimited dictatorial power over their congregations. Although the pastor of an African American Baptist church is expected to exercise a great degree of control, pastoral authority is delegated to each pastor by the congregation as that church seeks to express God’s sovereign authority over the life of the congregation. He stipulates that the degree of control that the pastor exerts is ultimately subject to the will of the congregation. Rev. Jenkins also describes the dynamics of the relationships between African American congregations.

The topic of sole membership has been of recent interest in Southern Baptist life. At the request of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, the trustee boards of each SBC denominational entity were asked to consider and change their institutional charters to

name the Southern Baptist Convention as the legal sole member of the corporation. Most Southern Baptist entities revised their charters to comply with this request. The trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary expressed reservations and concerns about such a move. The reluctance and initial declination to adopt sole membership on the part of the NOBTS trustees generated much discussion and renewed interest about Baptist polity, particularly regarding the relationship of denominational entities to each other and to the churches who support them.

The sole membership discussion has generated several essays from differing perspectives on this subject in an attempt to define and clarify the issues. In response to a request by the NOBTS trustees, seminary president Dr. Charles S. Kelley prepared a position paper entitled [*The Baptist Way: A Personal Perspective*](#). At the behest of Dr. Morris Chapman, CEO of the Executive Committee, Dr. David Hankins, who serves as vice president for Cooperative Program for the Executive Committee, wrote a reply to Kelley's paper entitled [*The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities: A Response to Charles Kelley's The Baptist Way*](#). Dr. Ken Keathley, associate professor of theology at NOBTS, and Dr. Lloyd Harsh, assistant professor of church history at NOBTS, wrote a rejoinder to Dr. Hankins' essay entitled [*A Program of Cooperation: A Rejoinder to David Hankins' "The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities."*](#) All Baptists would enrich their understanding of Baptist history and polity by reading these treatises.

Dr. Ergun Mehmet Caner provides a scholarly and critical assessment for the perspectives and positions articulated in these essays. Baptists have a history of struggling with polity issues; Dr. Caner, however, does a noteworthy job of contextualizing the current discussion within SBC life and history. He also engages and analyzes the merits of the

arguments both of Dr. Kelley and Dr. Hankins. Southern Baptists will find his article instructive and helpful as they grapple not only with SBC history and polity but also with the complexities and implications of the current debate. Dr. Caner's article is best and most appropriately understood when read in the context of the previously mentioned articles regarding sole membership.

In the essay entitled *None Dare Call It Treason: Is an Inclusivist a Paul Revere or a Benedict Arnold?*, Dr. Ken Keathley engages the theological concept of inclusivism. The most common theological form of inclusivism is "private inclusivism," which states that an individual can be saved by God apart from the preaching of the Gospel in spite of whatever religion to which he or she may be an adherent. Another form of inclusivism, "corporate inclusivism," is growing in popularity and adherence in certain segments of evangelical life. Corporate inclusivism, according to Keathley, stipulates that "non-Christian religions mediate the work of Christ." Although he rejects both private and corporate inclusivism as a viable theological position, Dr. Keathley's essay is a focused examination and refutation of corporate inclusivism.

This edition of the JBTM is expanded to include a section devoted to book reviews. Although numerically limited, we believe these first reviews to be of significant quality as well as professionally and practically beneficial. Our goal is to expand significantly the number of reviews in future editions of the journal. In light of recent popular interests, as well as the absolute importance of the subject for our faith, the theme for the fall edition will be "The Passion of Christ." Articles will cover a wide array of issues related to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Until the Lord returns, may He find us faithful,

Stan Norman, Editor