

*Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*. Edited by Mark Dever. Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001, 586 pp., \$21.00.

Mark Dever, pastor of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D. C. and the senior fellow of the Center for Church Reform, has edited a collection of Baptist writings on church polity. This volume is organized into two divisions. The first section contains three introductory essays written by Mark Dever, Greg Wills, and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. The second division has ten historical reprints from eighteenth and nineteenth century Baptist leaders. Dever states that the project is an attempt to rejoin and rejuvenate discussions that were of great importance for Baptists a century ago. According to the editor, the discussion is to discover “what the Bible teaches about how we as Christians should organize our lives together in churches” (ix).

In his introductory essay, Dever addresses the role and responsibility of the pastor in shaping the life of the church. Through a historical investigation of the responsibilities of Baptist pastors in previous centuries, he identifies the “noble task” of the pastor as the right preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the ordinances. According to Dever, American Baptists essentially enjoyed a uniformity of doctrine during the early and mid nineteenth centuries, as demonstrated in their shared adherence to and vigorous preaching of the doctrines of grace. In addition, the ordinances of a Baptist church (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) were rightly administered when these were coupled with a robust practice of church discipline. Dever contends that it was through preaching and presiding over the life of the church (as expressed in the administration of the ordinances) that Baptist pastors of previous eras were able to shape and influence their churches in a more biblical, godly direction than that which is found in the majority of Baptist churches today.

Greg Wills undertakes two tasks in his essay. First, he discusses the important role that polity had for Baptists in all aspects of church life. Wills demonstrates that Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries believed that the biblical governance of a church could advance orthodoxy, evangelism, and discipleship. These Baptists believed that “correct polity fostered true spirituality” (20). Polity was thus a means through which a church communicated its convictions about doctrine, the ordinances, church membership, and church discipline. Second, Wills provides a brief biographical overview for each author whose work is included within the historical reprints section.

The third introductory essay, written by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., examines the issue of church discipline within American Christianity. The inclusion of this essay within a volume on Baptist polity suggests that the editor believes the arguments enunciated are not only apropos for American Christianity but, even more specifically, for Baptist life. Mohler equates the demise of the practice of church discipline to the accommodation of American Christianity to American culture. Because of this accommodation, the church has acquiesced to the moral individualism prevalent within American societal ethos. This phenomenon has in turn led to the downfall of the practice of church discipline, thereby precipitating the loss of effective witness and ministry. Mohler argues that the great task of the church is the reclamation of its “missing mark;” that is, church discipline. Only through its recovery will American Christianity in general and Baptist life in particular regain fidelity of doctrine, purity of moral conduct, and unity of Christian fellowship.

The second division of this volume contains historical reprints of the writings of select eighteenth and nineteenth century Baptist leaders. Several of these treatises address the general topic of Baptist polity. The authors of these works are Benjamin Griffith, W. B. Johnson, J. L. Reynolds, and William Williams. The other manuscripts address the specific doctrine of church discipline. Baptist luminaries such as Benjamin Keach, Samuel Jones, Joseph S. Baker, P. H. Mell, and Eleazer Savage wrote these. A summary of church discipline from the Charleston Association (1774) is also included. In addition to the biographical introductions included in Wills' essay, each reprint is further introduced by a historical sketch of the author reprinted from William Cathcart's *Baptist Encyclopedia*.

Certain readers will question the definition of polity represented within this work. Most definitions of "polity" focus on the structure of governance and decision-making within the church. The expansion of polity to encompass all aspects of church life seems a bit strained; yet, the inclusion of other ecclesiastic concepts within a discussion of polity does illustrate the organic nature of church life. The governance of a church does in fact have immediate implications for the understanding and practice of the ordinances, church discipline, witness, and ministry.

Other readers may perceive Dever's selection of authors and topics as rather myopic. For example, why the inclusion of only eighteenth and nineteenth century Calvinist Baptists? Did any non-Calvinist Baptists in these or later periods write on the doctrine of church polity? Further, why does a volume on church polity contain more writings on church discipline than upon the specific topic of congregationalism? Clearer delimitations and definitions for these issues would have easily alleviated these matters.

Despite these concerns, this collection is a valuable and welcomed contribution to Baptist studies. The reprints are a poignant reminder of the vitality and challenges of Baptist churches in previous eras. The inclusion of essays from contemporary Baptists with the treatises of Baptists from other eras demonstrates a continuity of concerns that have confronted all Baptists. Dever has provided a useful work that will certainly enrich current conceptions of Baptist life both in the classroom and the church. Baptists and non-Baptists alike are challenged to be thoroughly biblical in their understanding and practice of church polity.

Stan Norman  
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary