

Foreword to the Second Revised Edition

IN ISSUING THIS FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY REVISION OF the classic *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, Judson Press is providing an update that is timely and critical for two prominent reasons.

First, many leaders and probably the majority of members in our American Baptist congregations did not grow up in the Baptist tradition. They come from many backgrounds with a variety of ideas about what church is. Some bring ideas from independent congregations and some from churches outside the free-church tradition with more hierarchical systems and yet others from purely secular backgrounds. One Baptist preacher has said, “When you don’t know who you are, you act like who you ain’t.” Therefore, this revision of Maring and Hudson’s classic volume will be a valuable tool for helping those new to Baptist life, and specifically, to American Baptist life, to understand the scriptural values, the theological norms, and the historical antecedents that have shaped how we understand and live *church*.

The Baptist practices mentioned in the book’s title refer to those ways of being church together. These practices flow from our ecclesiology, which is rooted in our understanding

of the importance of each person's acceptance of Christ as Lord; of the active role of the whole congregation in ministry and the governance of the church; and of our commitment to liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state. Each of these themes can easily be lost or subverted if not taught and lived by our community of faith. (Witness the trend in some Baptist settings toward ruling pastors or ruling elders!)

A second reason for this timely update of a classic resource is the issue of scandals that have adversely affected the public perception of the church in our broader culture. It is not uncommon to read popular surveys in which the church is characterized as unloving, judgmental, and hypocritical. In light of such negative images of the Christian church (and perhaps of the Baptist church in particular), it is essential that we revisit what it means to be a *covenanted community of disciples of Jesus*. Each of those words is an important quality that impacts the mission of the church of Jesus Christ.

Covenanted refers to the essential unity of the church as those individuals whose lives have been bound together through our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and through our commitment to walk together in his way and in his Spirit to the glory of God. As such it is a powerful antidote to a consumer view of church life that focuses solely upon me and what I receive—the “me”-centered church. Covenant also sets a framework for the healthy interplay of liberty and accountability that has marked Baptist life. And it speaks to the nature of the unity of congregations in common life with one another. In our day, the continuing fragmentation of congregations and the denomination are a scandal in the eyes of skeptics. Covenant binds us together within and among congregations with sacred intentionality.

Community reinforces that we are a people of God whose life together is an essential part of the experience of God's

reign. As such it is a corrective to the hyper-individualism that bedevils North American culture. This volume's discussion of autonomy and interdependence in conjunction with the associational principle sets in context our understanding of faith as personal but not private. The quality of our life as a community—an early Baptist concern—is a key factor in our effectiveness in evangelism and discipleship. Our worship, which draws us into the power of Jesus' cross and resurrection, coupled with how we practice grace, love, repentance, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation as the new humanity, are the distinguishing marks by which we will be known.

Disciples of Jesus is a phrase that signifies our call both to grow in intimacy with Christ through the historic spiritual practices of our faith rooted and guided by Scripture and to live more fully in mission and ministry as Christ's hands and feet. The contemporary emphasis called "missional church" emphasizes the historic Baptist understanding that every baptized believer is called into ministry as a disciple gifted by the Holy Spirit. The life of the church is of necessity oriented outward in mission. As American Baptists we have understood that the life of the disciple leads to both personal and societal transformation. The essence of discipleship, hence, is summed up in the two great commands of Christ: love of God and love of neighbor.

Baptist life and practice have always been dynamic, rooted in the Gainsborough Principle that God always has more light to shed upon Scripture. While there have been consistent characteristics of Baptist life since its founding, rigid conformity has never been a norm of our life. *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* sensitively outlines and discusses those characteristics while duly noting how practices of implementation have often diverged in different settings. In so doing, it is faithful to the Baptist understanding of our life together marked by both freedom and community. On behalf of the

American Baptist Churches USA, I express gratitude to David Gregg and Judson Press for their work in updating this important guide to Baptist faith and practice.

Yours in Christ,

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January 1, 2012