

Southern Baptists, Tongues, and Historical Policy

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Historical Precedent

The situation seems all too familiar now. Trustees of a mission board, empowered to enact policies they believe best represent Southern Baptist doctrine and practice, pass a new policy which stipulates that any missionary candidate who speaks in a private prayer language has disqualified himself from consideration. This stricter set of regulations is first birthed via general guidelines which the trustees believed needed to be codified with stronger language. Subsequently, one trustee speaks out against the new directive questioning the definition of *glossolalia* (Gr., “speaking in tongues”).¹ Moreover, the president of the agency, elected because he was considered a conservative, incredibly speaks out against the new policy, although he subsequently promises to follow its guidelines.² Finally, accusations are then leveled at some of the trustees, alleging a dispensational view of Scripture is behind these actions. One noted critic wrote, “If a fundamentalist understanding of scripture was to be the guiding principle, then glossolalia could not be allowed.”³

Yet, the situation is not exactly what one may think. The above situation is not about new directives given to the International Mission Board in November 2005; rather, it involves the Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board), and the year this new policy was adopted was 1987. At the time, the battle for the soul of the Southern Baptist Convention was raging and in many ways reaching its peak. The Dallas convention of 1985, which registered more than 45,000 messengers, proved to be a watershed year for the conservative cause with Charles Stanley being elected President. By 1988, the year following the enactment of these new policies regarding tongues, Southern Baptists met in San Antonio, Texas, where more than 32,000 messengers were registered.

Considering the present outcry from a few Southern Baptists over the new IMB policy, one would think a similar chorus of disapproval would have arisen during the 1988 San Antonio convention. Yet, when the report of the Home Mission Board was

¹Joe Westbury, “HMB Tightens Divorce, Tongues Guidelines,” *Baptist Standard* (5 Aug 1987): 13. The trustee quoted is Jim Strickland, then pastor of Heritage Church in Cartersville, Georgia.

²James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The ‘State’ of the Denomination*, vol. 4 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1989), 114.

³Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Changes and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 225. Ammerman does correctly understand that conservative Baptists were/are concerned about a strong Baptist identity. She wrote, “On one side, the trustees moved to distinguish themselves from their evangelical neighbors in the ‘modern charismatic movement’” (224). See also “Dispensationalism Root of SBC Troubles,” *Baptist Standard* (22 August 1984): 11, 16. In the article, Southwestern Seminary professor Bruce Corley argues that “the focus has shifted from biblical inerrancy to an ‘inerrant’ system of interpretation, namely dispensationalism” (11)

given, there were no objections and no questions whatsoever. In fact, the session was rather poorly attended—with less than one thousand people in the audience. Therefore, what possible reasons could there be for this lack of protest? Consider the following facts:

- 1) The president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Dr. Adrian Rogers, voiced no disapproval of the new policies.
- 2) Jim Strickland was the sole opposition to the new policy, in spite of a good number of “loyal opposition” moderates and “swing votes” on the board.⁴
- 3) The trustee board was obviously far more unified regarding the new tongues policy than they were regarding the new divorce policy adopted at the same meeting. The vote for a more restrictive policy on divorce passed 48-20; the vote strengthening the policy on tongues passed with near unanimity.

For nearly twenty years now the North American Mission Board (NAMB) has maintained its course with regard to its restrictive policy on tongues, while experiencing substantial growth in its missionary force and its new church plants. Today, the board employs more than 5,300 missionaries, an increase of more than 1,500 since 1987. Additionally, NAMB is now reaching out to more ethnicities than ever before.⁵ The narrowing of parameters did not prove to be a detriment in any evidentiary way. Indeed, pristine doctrine proved to be a boon to growth. Once again, Adrian Rogers may have proven to be a prophet, when he reminded conventioners during his sermon in San Antonio, “The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power and the wider its usefulness. The modern cry, less creed and more liberty, is a degeneration from the ‘vertebrae to the jelly fish.’”⁶

The Issue at Hand: Glossolalia and Policy

The issue at hand is not merely the interpretation of *glossolalia*, but whether the Board of Trustees has the right to make restrictive policies. Does this duly-elected body of governors have the right to go beyond the bounds of the accepted confession of faith? The obvious answer concerning their right to do so is an unequivocal “yes.” Trustees are charged by Southern Baptist churches through appointments during the annual Southern Baptist Convention to represent Southern Baptists in carrying out the task of sending biblically-qualified missionaries to the field. Frank Page, newly elected president of the

⁴Hefley argues, according to the Coleman survey, that the HMB had 35% conservatives, 21% moderates, 35% swing voters, and 9% unclassified (112).

⁵http://www.namb.net/site/c.9qKILUOzEpH/b.245607/k.A9D1/Annual_Report.htm; accessed 8 September 2006. Of the 1,725 new church plants last year, 48% were ethnic or African-American congregations.

⁶Hefley, 50. This quote actually originates from B.H. Carroll, founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Southern Baptist Convention in 2006, reiterated this notion: “There are a multitude of issues that have to be dealt with within the trustee framework that go way beyond the Baptist Faith and Message.... There are many things that the Baptist Faith and Message just simply doesn’t deal with....”⁷

Furthermore, not all—or perhaps any—decisions will be met with unanimous agreement. For example, although the Baptist Faith and Message does not address the matter of divorce, the International Mission Board has *from its inception* in 1845 argued that divorced men and women may not be considered for appointment. This was reaffirmed by the preceding Foreign Mission Board in 1987.⁸ Here is another decision that carries many similarities with the present-day controversy. It is certainly clear that the biblical parameters of divorce are hotly contested in some Southern Baptist circles, and even more so in the broader evangelical world. Godly scholars often disagree with each other’s interpretation on this issue. Yet, although many interpretations from Scripture have been offered, Southern Baptists have consistently come down on the side of caution. In the end, it is our responsibility as Southern Baptists to speak for Southern Baptists, not to appease a broader and often poorly-defined Evangelicalism.

Autonomy is another issue that must be addressed. Not only is each church autonomous, but every association, every state convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention are autonomous as well. Thus, in spite of claims otherwise, there is no violation of local church autonomy when trustees address the issue of *glossolalia*. Just as every church has the right to affirm or deny the modern practice which goes under the name of “speaking in tongues,” so does the Southern Baptist Convention.

In fact, historical precedent demonstrates that many local associations and state conventions have dealt with this very issue. Note a few representative instances:

- 1) In 1975, six churches were “barred from fellowship by four associations of Southern Baptist churches in three states.”⁹ A news article acknowledged the divisiveness of tongues upon congregations, and Robert Baker, then professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, articulated that he would rather see these churches withdraw.
- 2) In 1996, the Florida Baptist Convention’s mission board voted to disfellowship two churches for neo-Pentecostalism.¹⁰

⁷James A. Smith, Sr., “Page talks about SBC theological issues in debate,” *Florida Baptist Witness* (27 July 2006), at www.floridabaptistwitness.com/6200.article; accessed 7 September 2006. In addition to this affirmation, it is widely known that other entities of the SBC require more than the BFM 2000. For example, professors at Southern Seminary and Southeastern Seminary must sign the 1859 *Abstract of Principles*.

⁸Bob Stanley, “FMB Affirms Divorce Ban, New Seminary Policy,” *Baptist Standard* (21 October 1987): 8.

⁹Tim Nicholas, “Baptist Charismatics Emerging from ‘Closets,’” *Baptist Standard* (21 July 1976): 4. The associations involved were the Dallas association (Texas), the Trenton association (Louisiana), the Plaquemines association (Louisiana), and the Harmony association (California).

¹⁰Keith Hinson, “Florida Board Disfellowships 2 Charismatic Churches,” *Baptist Press* (20 May 1996). The article explains that these two churches believed in a subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit,

- 3) In 1999, the Webster County Baptist Association (Missouri) voted to withdraw fellowship from Calvary Baptist Church, Marshfield, over the issue of charismatic worship. As one article noted, the issue involved “practices such as speaking in tongues.”¹¹ The vote was 102-2.

It is evident that Southern Baptists have historically taken a cautious tone towards the Charismatic movement in general and *glossolalia* in particular.¹² They have recognized the lesson of church history that these enthusiastic movements can be greatly divisive to the local churches and to the larger body of Christ. One need look no further than the second-century Montanist movement—the first true dissenting movement within early Christianity which was largely based on prophecy and ecstatic utterances—to understand the controversial nature of these practices. A mature Christian clearly knows that this problem is not simply an argument over Paul’s command to “not forbid the speaking of tongues.”

Moreover, the International Mission Board itself has, to a certain extent, previously dealt with the issue of speaking in tongues. Indeed, the Mission Personnel Committee handled the subject of tongues and issued a statement on June 23, 1992. It maintained:

The Foreign Mission Board has not voted a policy statement with regard to glossolalia and it is not mentioned among the criteria for mission service. However, the Foreign Mission Board represents all Southern Baptists and it is important that our missionaries be people who are comfortable with worship as it is normally expressed within the Southern Baptist family of churches. As we talk with candidates we discuss their beliefs, patterns of worship and devotional life, and a host of other issues related to their life as Christians and Baptists. In the course of such discussions we find that it is appropriate and natural to talk about worship and prayer, including glossolalia if that is a part of the individual’s experience. Our intention in those discussions is neither to interrogate nor to instruct, but to come to a point of mutual understanding. In terms of worship practices, the vast majority of Southern Baptist churches do not practice glossolalia in their public services. *Therefore, if a person feels that glossolalia is a vital, significant and public part of his or her conviction and practice, we believe that person has eliminated himself or herself from being a representative of the majority of Southern Baptists* [emphasis mine]. At the same time, we do not

which the BFM 2000 addresses. But the convention was also concerned with believers being slain in the Spirit, an issue the BFM does not address explicitly.

¹¹Tim Palmer, “Association expels Missouri church over charismatic worship practices,” *Baptist Press*, at www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?ID=521; accessed 6 September 2006.

¹²Tim Nicholas, “Singing in the Spirit: A new tune for an old movement,” *Home Missions* (July-August 1976), 34-47. In this article, Nicholas interviews prominent pastors such as Jaroy Weber who argued “whenever we have had this [tongues], we have had a division of fellowship” (47). Malcolm Tolbert added that any church that has a pastor declare himself charismatic “is going to suffer” (47).

try to enter into the prayer closet of an individual to monitor or evaluate that person's prayer language or life.¹³

This quote illustrates the importance that IMB trustees and staff have always placed upon relating to “worship as it is *normally expressed* within the Southern Baptist family of churches.” It is critical to understand that guidelines or policies must acknowledge the need for Southern Baptist missionaries to represent faithfully those who support them financially and pray for them continually. This faithfulness to the churches extends to the public practice of speaking of tongues—and, with the new policy, it extends to “private prayer languages,” too. The guideline argues that a person who “feels that glossolalia is a vital, significant, and public part of his or her conviction and practice...has eliminated himself or herself from being a representative of the *majority of Southern Baptists*” [emphasis mine].” Jerry Rankin, who was elected after this guideline was passed, affirms the position held and fully supports its justification.¹⁴

Exegetical Fallacy: Can Public Tongues Be Divorced from Private Tongues?

The controversy, then, does not pit Cessationists (those theologians who believe that the spectacular gifts ceased to be necessary once the New Testament was written) versus Continualists (those who assume that the New Testament gifts are still in evidence among Christians, today). For example, Jerry Rankin, who prohibits the public speaking of tongues, may be considered a semi-Cessationist, because he forbids speaking in tongues in public worship but not in private worship.¹⁵ Instead, the disagreement concerns whether one can exegetically argue that a private prayer language is allowed while a public prayer language is prohibited.

There are two principle passages which must be considered regarding a private prayer language: Romans 8:26 and 1 Corinthians 14. Paul writes in Romans 8:26:

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

¹³See the General Policy Manual, 200-11, for more discussion.

¹⁴In the article by James Smith, “Page talks about SBC theological issues in debate,” Frank Page also affirms this guideline stating, “I believe there should be serious criteria that would exclude persons from service in that regard.”

¹⁵In fact, it is a fallacious argument to say the new policy represents a Cessationist position. The trustee position asserts that tongues are still legitimate in the present, but the legitimacy is found in *known* languages not yet studied, not in ecstatic utterances as some hold.

For a brief yet scholarly discussion on the gift of tongues, see Malcolm Yarnell, “[Speaking of Tongues, What Does the Bible Teach?](#)” at www.BaptistTheology.org. Also, if one desires a discussion between two Evangelical views relating to tongues as known or unknown languages, see Robert Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* (Kregel, 1998) and D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Baker, 1987). If one wants to see the traditional view held by Baptists, see B.H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible: James, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Broadman, 1913).

Though it may (and should) seem logically incoherent to non-Charismatic readers, many Charismatics argue that “the groanings which cannot be uttered” can be better rendered “with groanings that words cannot express.” Thus, the argument goes, when a believer can no longer use his own language, the Spirit intercedes in His language.

But it takes hermeneutical gymnastics to get to the point where that which is unutterable—“words cannot express”—means “articulated through the Holy Spirit and His language.” First, the context of Romans 8 concerning the Spirit’s decided role in salvation, has nothing to do with speaking in tongues. Second, any word study immediately identifies the “groanings” as speechless or lacking speech. A.T. Robertson, the greatest Greek scholar ever produced by Southern Baptists, exclaimed, “It is the picturesque word of rescue by one who ‘happens on’ (*entugchanei*) one who is in trouble and ‘in his behalf’ (*huper*) pleads ‘with unuttered groanings’ (instrumental case) or with ‘sighs that baffle words’ (Denny). This is the work of our Helper, the Spirit himself.”¹⁶ Confirming this interpretation, the Revised Standard Version translates the phrase, “with sighs too deep for words.” Third, it may be worth noting that the Spirit intercedes “on our behalf” or “for” us, not “through” us. Fourth, any insistence upon the Holy Spirit speaking for us is, as two scholars have noted, “to admit that God cannot know the mind of the Holy Spirit or the mind of the believer unless prayer is verbally expressed, or else He has an inclination toward hearing spiritual mutterings that are non-sensical to the masses. No Christian would wish to argue that way.”¹⁷ In the end, one should be wary of building doctrine on one verse of Scripture, especially according to such an unusual interpretation of that verse. Thus, if an unusual interpretation of Romans 8:26 is the sole basis for one’s practice of a private prayer language, that believer should excise this experience from his walk with the Lord.

But most of those who defend a private prayer language use 1 Corinthians 14 as the justification for the practice. In particular, verses 14 through 17 play an integral role in such an interpretation. Paul writes in these verses:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

The issue of prayer, of course, is center stage in the discussion. With that reminder, A.T. Robertson asserts, “Paul is distinctly in favour of the use of the intellect in prayer. Prayer is an intelligent exercise of the mind.... There was ecstatic singing like the rhapsody of

¹⁶A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 377.

¹⁷Paige Patterson and Danny Akin, “Speaking in Tongues,” (Dallas: Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, n.d.), 11.

some prayers without intelligent words. But Paul prefers singing that reaches the intellect as well as stirs the emotions.”¹⁸

Using the same line of reasoning, John MacArthur contends this passage discourages any prayer language, because “[t]he type of tongues the Corinthians practiced had no edifying value at all.”¹⁹ His argument is based on certain principles in the text, including:

- 1) *Prayer is always intelligible.* “I believe a better translation, however, is ‘to a god’.... The translation here of ‘a god’ is supported by the fact that the Bible records no instance of believers speaking to God in anything but normal, intelligible language.... His reference included the repetitious and unintelligible gibberish of pagan tongues-speaking, in which certain meaningless sounds were repeated over and over again.”
- 2) *Without interpretation, private prayer language is useless.* “Because even true tongues must be interpreted in order to be understood, they cannot possibly edify anyone, including the person speaking, without such interpretation. They cannot, therefore, be intended by God for private devotional use, as many Pentecostals and charismatics claim.”
- 3) *Spiritual gifts are for the edification of the body.* “The purpose of gifts, Paul was saying, is to minister *for* God but not *to* God....’ To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (12:7)”²⁰

In early church history, most of the church fathers would agree with MacArthur’s conclusions. Ambrosiaster, a proconsul in Africa in the mid-fourth century, whose commentary was used by Augustine, remarked on verse fourteen by asking the rhetorical question: “What can a person achieve if he does not know what he is saying?”²¹ John Chrysostom (347-407 AD), the Eastern bishop nicknamed “Golden Mouth” for his homiletical prowess, affirmed Ambrosiaster’s sentiment, exclaiming, “Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues, however much he may belittle the gift, but he insists that it be kept under control and used for the edification of the whole church.”²²

In the end, one must recognize that Paul was engaging practices within the local congregation at Corinth. He was not issuing statements on any private consideration, but was referring to the need for balance found in the fact that all spiritual gifts are for the common good, not for self-edification (1 Corinthians 12:7). Indeed, this passage, which has been used by some to justify a private prayer language, actually argues against such

¹⁸A.T. Robertson, 183.

¹⁹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 371.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 372.

²¹Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 141.

²²*Ibid.*, 144. A few church fathers, notably Tertullian, did sympathize with ecstatic utterances.

practice. First, Paul affirms that he will pray *both* in the Spirit and in understanding. But a prayer language cannot accomplish the latter. One would have to claim that Paul was discussing two different types of prayer in the passage, an argument from silence at best, and an argument which has no confirmation in any other New Testament passage. Second, the prayer in the context of the passage was given for the benefit and affirmation of the congregation. That is why they say “Amen.” Yet, a private prayer language cannot grant this blessing. Finally, tongues in the form of a private prayer language would be singled out as the only spiritual gift listed that has a personal use outside the body of Christ. Can anyone imagine prophesying privately? Or, teaching privately? Or, giving privately? Or, leading privately? Or, helping privately? Or, evangelizing privately?

Evangelical Ecumenism, Southern Baptists, and the Need for Prevention

The contemporary phenomenon of speaking in tongues, along with other Charismatic practices has infiltrated every major denomination in America, including Southern Baptist life. With historical origins of the Charismatic movement beginning in the 1960s, many believers, regardless of church affiliation, “started seeking all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament.”²³ One need look no further than at examples such as Abba’s House in Hixon, Tennessee, a church led by Southern Baptist pastor Ron Phillips that holds charismatic conferences annually praying that many Southern Baptists will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic influence has also arisen in academic circles through scholarly books, such as Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994). In that text, Grudem, a Reformed Charismatic, grants a sympathetic hearing for a Charismatic interpretation of spiritual gifts. In fact, it is quite telling that less than a generation ago, most Southern Baptist seminarians were using more traditional Baptist texts like Millard Erickson’s *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1983). Unfortunately, that is not the case today.

Noting the paradigm shift, one cannot overlook the momentum the Charismatic movement is having on Evangelical life. Yet, Southern Baptists remain very uncomfortable with Charismatic practices, especially when they note the weak epistemology of experientialism latent within the movement. For the most part, Southern Baptists have reacted negatively to inroads Charismatics have forced into the local Baptist churches. This response is largely due to the novel interpretation of how such gifts should be used and the excesses generated. The Southern Baptist response toward the Charismatic movement has always been extremely cautious.²⁴

Yet, the question must be asked, “Should Southern Baptists acquiesce in their policies due to the claims of a few who practice some or all of these Charismatic gifts? From the perspective of a pastor, one should answer “no.” A pastor leads his flock by preaching the Word of God as faithfully as he can. When the pastor comes across certain

²³Wayne Grudem, ed., *A Miraculous Gifts for Today?: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 11.

²⁴ Southern Baptist theologians like James Leo Garrett have acknowledged subjective benefits to some practices while arguing in a traditional Baptist manner. See Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, Texas: BIBAL Press, 2000), 233-34.

issues in the Scripture which are highly controversial, he must teach his congregation to uphold theological parameters that he deems most faithful to the biblical texts. Though some godly Christians in his congregation may reasonably disagree, his position should remain unchanged unless he is convinced otherwise from Scripture.

For most Southern Baptists, there is little or no compelling evidence that tongues as practiced by the Charismatic movement has any basis in Scripture. Since we are a people of the Book, whose authority must be guided by what the Scripture says, we have a weighty obligation to uphold the principles in the Word of God in every one of our policies. The first generation of the Conservative Resurgence focused upon the inerrancy of the Bible, a battle which has been victorious for more than 25 years. But the second generation of the Resurgence must spotlight the sufficiency of Scripture in our lives and in our policies. Ultimately, Southern Baptists must remember that truth is eternally vigilant and hence, as soldiers of the Lord, we must always be ready to stand for truth. Truth is immortal.

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The word Southern in Southern Baptist Convention stems from it having been founded and rooted in the Southern United States, following a split from American Civil War, another split occurred when most freedmen set up independent congregations. Many set up their own Baptist churches, regional associations, and state and national conventions, such as the National Baptist Convention, which became the second largest Baptist convention. Others joined new African-American denominations, chiefly the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Southern Baptists emphasize the significance of the individual conversion experience which is affirmed by the person having complete immersion in water for a believer's baptism. Allowing Southern Baptist missionaries to speak in tongues, or have what some SBC leaders call a "private prayer language," speaks to the growing strength of Pentecostal churches in Africa, Asia and South America, where Southern Baptists are competing for converts and where energized new Christians are enthusiastically embracing the practice. "In so many parts of the world, these charismatic experiences are normative," said Bill Leonard, professor of church history at Wake Forest Divinity School. "Religious groups that oppose them get left behind evangelistically." The policy changes approved this week during an IMB trustee meeting in Louisville, Ky., will leave the question of tongues in the application. Controversy is again brewing in the Southern Baptist Convention over the practice of speaking... Magazine article The Christian Century. 'Tongues' Resurfaces as Southern Baptist Issue. Read preview. Article excerpt. Controversy is again brewing in the Southern Baptist Convention over the practice of speaking in tongues. Last year the denomination's International Mission Board adopted a policy that forbids considering missionary candidates who use a "private prayer language." Now, an Arlington, Texas, pastor and trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has written to Southern Baptist president Frank Page to request that the issues of "spiritual gif