

An Open Letter to Southern Baptists

The issue of spiritual gifts—particularly speaking in tongues—has divided charismatics and Baptists for too long. Can we talk together?

I am a third-generation Pentecostal. I am also a grateful graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I owe much to Southern Baptists, and I'm concerned for their future. The actions taken in the last two years by the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board (IMB) and the trustees of my alma mater in issuing statements against the practice of a private prayer language do not bode well for the influence of this great denomination in coming years.

In the late 1970s, when I could not have afforded most other evangelical seminaries, the generosity of Southern Baptists through their Cooperative Program made it possible for me to sit under the teaching of some of the finest, most gifted men of God I have ever known. I remain deeply grateful for the magnanimity of Southern Baptists, both in allowing a Pentecostal to attend one of their seminaries and in making that education financially feasible.

When I was a young pastor, many of the great preachers were Southern Baptists—John Bisagno, W.A. Criswell and, of course, Billy Graham. Wishing to leave what appeared to me the cloistered little world of my early Pentecostalism (but without setting aside my charismatic encounter with the Holy Spirit), I wanted to realign with those who were serious about evangelism and missions. In the 1970s, my desire led me straight to Southern Baptists. Yet in comparison to the recent edicts of the IMB and the trustees of Southwestern, my early Pentecostalism doesn't seem so cloistered, after all.

Apparently we have come full circle. The charismatic movement was causing convulsions among Southern Baptists 30 years ago just as it is doing now. But at Southwestern in the 1970s there was a higher agenda: The focus was on reaching people for Christ and fulfilling the Great Commission.

Roy Fish was imparting evangelistic passion that helped inspire students such as Rick Warren to impact millions with the gospel. My missions professor, Cal Guy, was espousing innovative missions strategies. He assigned us reading material from missiologists whose backgrounds ranged from Anglican to the Assemblies of God. The atmosphere at Southwestern exuded a warm, broad evangelicalism.

But 30 miles away from the Fort Worth, Texas, campus, Beverly Hills Baptist Church and Shady Grove Baptist Church were being “disfellowshipped” from the Dallas Baptist Association for charismatic practices that were deemed unscriptural by that association and not in keeping with standard Baptist practice. Little by little the outward-looking, evangelistic giant—the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)—became inverted and, at times, petty.

Shrinking Parameters

With a few exceptions, such as the highly effective Prestonwood Baptist Church, a host of Southern Baptist churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth area have declined in numbers and influence since that unfortunate earlier posture against charismatic phenomena. Is there a correlation? It may at least be worth considering by those who have taken similar positions in recent years.

When G. Campbell Morgan was asked if he was allied with the fundamentalists he replied, "In doctrine, yes, but I abominate their spirit." If he were still alive, might even the venerable English expositor "abominate the spirit" of the recent statements by two Southern Baptist boards against charismatic practices?

The statement by the IMB was an evident slap at its current president, Jerry Rankin, who has acknowledged having a private prayer language. Thankfully, not all members of the board were in step with this resolution.

Speaking for those who voted against it Wade Burleson commented, "We believed that going into a person's private prayer closet and demanding they not pray in tongues is not only a violation of Scripture, but is going way beyond the Baptist Faith and Message and the duties of the trustees in establishing qualifications for missionaries."

Clearly there are deep fault lines within the denomination on this issue. A recent study by LifeWay Research, affiliated with the SBC, found that 50 percent of Southern Baptist pastors "believe that the Holy Spirit gives some people the gift of a special language to pray to God privately."

This is an important finding. It means there is strong evidence that at least half of all Southern Baptist pastors believe speaking in tongues is a valid spiritual gift.

Yet, following the lead of the IMB in rejecting the use of a private prayer language by Southern Baptist missionaries and missionary candidates, the trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary issued a similar resolution:

“Southwestern will not knowingly endorse in any way, advertise, or commend the conclusions of the contemporary charismatic movement including ‘private prayer language.’ Neither will Southwestern knowingly employ professors or administrators who promote such practices.”

The one dissenting vote against this scripturally unfounded dictum was cast by Dwight McKissic Sr., pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas. McKissic has since resigned as a Southwestern trustee.

These anachronistic edicts are a throwback to the days of a threatened fundamentalism. Yes, trustees have the right and responsibility to set policies within their purview. But it’s a bit of a reach for them to monitor personal encounters with God and pronounce what is acceptable and what isn’t—especially when these encounters have a biblical basis.

Such pronouncements, especially by a graduate school, seem unnecessary and out of place. This is not, as the Southwestern trustees purport, a defense of historic Baptist practice. Rather, it is a departure from it. Historic Baptist practice endorsed tolerance of differing views regarding nonessential doctrines.

Departure From Historical Tradition

The resolutions by both the SBC and the IMB are glaringly out of sync with a long-standing record of Baptist altruism. Roger Williams, a renowned Baptist leader in early America, championed the priesthood of all believers and freedom to worship according to the dictates of one’s conscience.

Based on his wide yet firmly evangelical faith, Williams helped Baptists become known as “people of the Book.” They had “no creed but Christ.” The deeply cherished priesthood of all believers protected and welcomed individual interpretation of Scripture.

Eventually, with the encroachments of liberalism, Southern Baptists understandably felt the need for an agreed-upon statement of faith. The Baptist Faith and Message became a general framework that held unequivocally to evangelical tenets but allowed for breadth of interpretation on secondary matters.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, though more stringent than the original document, is still wisely silent on the issue of charismatic practices and a private prayer language. But some current board members evidently feel compelled to interpret what is acceptable Baptist practice regarding glossolalia for the rest of the 16 million Southern Baptists. The recent statements by the IMB and Southwestern trustees smack of being very “creedal” for a denomination that prides itself in being not so.

This irony was not lost on Joyce Rogers, widow of Adrian Rogers—former SBC president and longtime pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. In a tribute to her late husband at the 2006 Southern Baptist Convention, she expressed concern at the shrinking perimeters of Southern Baptist life. To sustained applause she noted that her husband “would not have been a part of what is going on in some parts of our convention today, getting narrower and narrower about very highly interpretive issues.”

In a trenchant statement clearly targeting the IMB resolution

she continued. "He would try to convince you of his view, but not to exclude you from service and fellowship, or to prevent you from going around the world with Southern Baptists to share the gospel if you disagreed on these controversial issues," she said.

Most Pentecostals and charismatics rejoiced when biblical conservatives repelled a widening liberalism and returned Southern Baptist institutions and agencies to the standard of the Bible as God's infallible Word. But now in some parts of Southern Baptist life we are witnessing conservatism gone amuck.

Hoping to follow in Williams' footsteps, I readily acknowledge the right of cessationists to believe as they do. At the same time, they have thrown down the gauntlet on this issue, and the resolutions they have made beg a response.

It seems an anomaly that some of those who most loudly support the inerrancy of Scripture (which I too endorse) are also cessationists. When it comes to a rationale for cessationism, these otherwise conservative scholars can sound quite liberal. After all, the essence of liberal biblical interpretation is to either downplay or disregard the obvious intent of Scripture. This is what cessationism does.

Most cessationists will always consider both charismatic doctrine and charismatic experience somehow "sub-biblical." But it is cessationism that has constructed a convoluted hermeneutic.

At Southwestern I was often reminded that we show honor to the Bible by careful exegesis. Yet to interpret Paul's 1

Corinthians 13 phrase, “when the perfect has come,” to mean “when the Canon is closed,” as many cessationists do, is to rely on weak, even embarrassing eisegesis.

It is unfair and untrue to caricature Pentecostals and charismatics as biblically illiterate. We disagree with Baptist cessationists regarding the practice of a private prayer language. But this is an issue of interpretation, not authority. With conservative Baptists we affirm that the Bible is completely true, without any mixture of error, and the final arbiter in all matters of faith and practice.

A Plea to Leaders

So, where do we go from here? I have three recommendations:

First, I urge my Baptist brothers and sisters to again make their greatest strength—evangelism and missions—their greatest priority: Southwestern President Paige Patterson has expressed his hope that this will indeed be Southwestern’s emphasis and ongoing legacy. I fully concur with him in this hope. However, I do not believe the future of evangelism and missions among Southern Baptists is in any way helped by denouncing charismatic practices.

Second, where The Baptist Faith and Message is silent, trustees should be silent. This seemed to be the sentiment of the majority of delegates to this year’s annual SBC, who passed a motion urging trustees of Baptist institutions and agencies not to overstep the bounds of The Baptist Faith and Message. Baptists do not necessarily have to embrace charismatic practices, but officially opposing these invites a continued decline in both their evangelistic effectiveness and

their global influence.

Some trustees need to wake up to 21st century realities. Baptist seminary students today almost certainly represent the last generation of denominational loyalists. Charismatic churches continue to burgeon worldwide while many Baptist churches are flat-lined. Trustees of Southern Baptist institutions do not have to like these realities, but they do have to deal with them.

One would think that directors of agencies or institutions of a denomination that has been static in numbers of baptisms for a decade would be doubly concerned not to quench the Spirit. Evidently, protecting what they perceive as standard denominational practice trumps any concern that they might be grieving the One who helps, fills and empowers us.

Third, I encourage Baptist leaders to speak out boldly and call for the reconsideration and even rescinding of these damaging resolutions. It is a time for courageous leadership. Prayerfully, Southern Baptists will continue producing great leaders for the body of Christ worldwide.

But this will require a firmer, broader embrace by Southern Baptists of the growing gamut of evangelical Christians, both traditional and charismatic. Let's take a cue from the ancient church motto: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Here is one Pentecostal who wants to see the success of every gospel-preaching, Christ-exalting Baptist church. Moreover, I want to see many millions more in God's family. The strength of Southern Baptists is needed to help fulfill the Great

Commission. What a serious accounting awaits us all if we cannot work together for world evangelization.

David Shibley is the president of Global Advance (), a ministry equipping leaders to fulfill the Great Commission. He is the author of several books, including *Living as if Heaven Matters* (Charisma House). He lives in Dallas.