

Pastor Faces Removal For Tongues Challenge

Wade Burleson says Southern Baptists should not bar missionaries from service over a 'nonessential' doctrine

On the heels of recent controversial policy changes, trustees of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) International Mission Board (IMB) have moved to oust a fellow trustee who publicly opposed new enactments—specifically one prohibiting missionaries from practicing a “private prayer language,” or speaking in tongues, in their devotions.

In a statement issued Jan. 11, IMB Board Chairman Tom Hatley called for the removal of Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla., who was elected to a four-year term as an IMB trustee in 2005.

“In taking this action, trustees addressed issues involving broken trust and resistance to accountability,” Hatley said in the statement, adding that the action was “absolutely necessary for the board to move forward in its duties as prescribed by the SBC.”

Hatley told Charisma the issue involved “relationship,” though he would not elaborate.

Following the November policy changes, Burleson began keeping a Web log, or blog, where he strongly opposed the changes. “We may not interpret the Bible the same, but we will not allow good men and women to be crucified by the sword of legalistic conformity,” wrote Burleson, who himself does not practice speaking in tongues.

Though Burleson's blog "may be" related to the request for his removal, his personal opinions did not encourage the decision, Hatley said.

After the board requested his removal, Burleson issued a statement on his blog. In a post titled "Heartbroken," he wrote that "a growing problem within our convention is the removal from leadership and service of those who do not conform to specific interpretations of the Bible."

The bigger issue, Burleson said, is that "the new policy changes violate many historic Baptist principles."

"They go beyond our confession of faith. ... They exclude conservative Southern Baptists who would normally be qualified to serve, they replace old policies that were excellent and staff initiated, they demand conformity on nonessential doctrines in order to 'represent' the Southern Baptist Convention," Burleson said.

The SBC has always prohibited missionaries from speaking in tongues publicly, but since the new policy is not retroactive, only new applicants will be prohibited from practicing the same prayer language that IMB President Jerry Rankin has admittedly practiced privately for more than 30 years.

The new shift in policy creates a climate that is unsupportive of its own president, said charismatic SBC pastor Ron Phillips, whose Fresh Oil church network includes Southern Baptist congregations. "A Spirit-filled man who has given his life to missions, Dr. Jerry Rankin, has been more or less told that what you believe, we don't agree with."

Rankin was unavailable for comment.

Southern Baptists who have embraced “private prayer language” are already feeling the backlash of the new policies. Southern Baptist Scott Camp adopted the practice 15 years before he was appointed dean of students at Criswell College in Dallas.

But a year into his post, the renewal of his contract was denied following the IMB policy changes. Camp says the decision is “directly related” to IMB’s policy change regarding speaking in tongues.

“They had full knowledge that that was my position when they hired me,” Camp said of the college. “What’s happened is the political climate has changed in the last six months, and the IMB’s decision to not allow this practice had a direct impact on the president’s decision to not renew my contract.”

Criswell President Jerry Johnson declined comment.

Hatley said the IMB stands behind its new policies. “The main intent of the new policy regarding tongues is to be sure that our churches and our church-planting movements across the land are solidly Baptist,” he said. “What we’re trying to do is protect our work on the field from theological damage from outside movements.”

The final vote to remove Burleson as a trustee will be held June 13-14 in Greensboro, N.C., though Hatley said the board hoped to revisit the issue in a March meeting. “I have very high hopes that we’re going to be able to do something to avoid asking the convention to have him removed,” Hatley said. “Let’s keep our eyes on the mission field. We’re going to get

our family business taken care of.”

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