

Southern Baptists Refuse to Rescind No-Tongues Rule

A motion to lift restrictions on charismatic practices was not considered at the SBC's New Orleans meeting

An attempt to rescind a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) policy that prohibits North American missionaries from speaking in tongues has failed, leaving its sponsor frustrated and uncertain of his next move.

Pastor Bob Shearer of Harbison Church of the Cross in Columbia, S.C., filed a resolution at the convention's annual meeting in mid-June. But it quietly died, with the resolutions committee not acting on the proposal.

"I don't know where to go," said Shearer, whose church includes a pair of tongues-speaking SBC missionaries serving overseas. "We are part of a denomination staunchly opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit as He moved in the first century."

Chattanooga, Tenn., pastor Ron Phillips, whose annual Fresh Oil conference for charismatic Baptists drew record attendance this spring, wasn't surprised the issue got pushed aside.

"There is no consistent position across state and agency lines relating to people who exercise spiritual gifts," he said.

However, even a positive reaction to Shearer's resolution would have come too late for First Baptist Church of Satellite Beach, Fla. The home church of noted teacher-author Jack Taylor voted April 1 to leave the SBC by a 77 percent to 23 percent margin. Senior pastor Larry Booth said the move followed a year of study and discussions with denominational authorities.

"There is a real bent on standing in opposition to the move of the Spirit," said Booth of the domestic missions board's policy. "We felt God telling us we couldn't stay connected with someone embracing Freemasonry and denying the move of the Holy Spirit in the world today."

Ultimately, First Baptist's move could signal the viability of a network of Baptist churches welcoming the freedom of the Holy Spirit, said a Tennessee pastor who left the convention in 1991. Tod Zeiger of Parkway Christian Fellowship conducts leadership conferences regularly for pastors and leaders from various denominations, including dozens of Southern Baptists.

"They're out there by the thousands," the suburban Knoxville pastor said of Baptists seeking the Spirit. "I call them cave dwellers. They're hungry for God. More of it's coming."

Once a denominational "climber," for 21 years he led churches of up to 4,000. Plagued by spiritual dryness, though, Zeiger and several other pastors met for daily prayer. By the third day the Lord "showed up with combat boots on," Zeiger said.

He credits his Spirit baptism with creating an intimacy with God and enabling him to see miracles, power and deliverance. He wishes more Baptists knew this freedom.

“What I see happening with the SBC is fundamentalists have gripped the reins so tight guys [such as] First Baptist are saying: ‘There’s no room for me here.’ There’s going to be a point where [Spirit-filled] people have to leave.”

The pastor of a charismatic church in Chattanooga, Tenn., sees similar circumstances unfolding in a leading African American denomination. Bishop Sean Teal was asked to leave a college operated by the National Baptist Convention (NBC) after his Spirit baptism in 1992.

However, the 34-year-old pastor of Friendship Community Church maintains old ties. Colleagues tell him that National Baptists are getting less receptive than ever to Pentecostal expressions.

“Young pastors talking about apostolic order, the baptism of the Holy Spirit and kingdom order are being silenced,” Teal said. “That’s why Bishop [Paul] Morton and the Full Gospel conference continue to be fed by the NBC.”

Ironically, when Teal came to the conservative, independent church, its members weren’t that receptive to tongues. After he began teaching about the Holy Spirit in an adult Sunday school class, attendance dropped in half. Still, he continued.

Today Friendship has grown from 30 to nearly 450, plus 100 at a new mission on the city’s east side. It has registered more than 250 converts in three years. Without an emphasis on the Holy Spirit, he doesn’t believe members would be seeking as intimate a relationship with God. Nor would leadership, holiness or soul-winning be as fervent, he said.

Despite hurdles that remain to be crossed, both Zeiger and Teal detect an exciting development—a joining of biblical teaching with the Holy Spirit. Zeiger sees a burning interest in these topics among Baptists and charismatics alike.