

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM HATLEY

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CTR: Dr. Hatley, explain for our readers the new International Mission Board (IMB) policy regarding tongues and the appointment of Southern Baptist missionaries.

HATLEY: The policy states, “No person who is actively participating in or promoting glossolalia shall be approved for appointment by the International Mission Board. This includes a private prayer language.” The policy also declares that its implementation is not retroactive, which means that all existing personnel are exempt to any review in light of this policy. The policy concludes with an exception clause that is governed by the staff and the Process Review Committee of the board.

The policy exists as an addition to the many qualifiers which are used to help applicants for mission service to determine whether or not the IMB is the right choice for them in their calling to mission service.

CTR: Prior to 1991, the IMB did not appoint people as missionaries who spoke in tongues. Why was this policy loosened, and what caused the IMB Trustees to recently revisit the issue?

HATLEY: I have done some of my own historical research on this and have constructed a time line of recent developments concerning how we have handled this issue. It seems that in the sixties, seventies, and early eighties the staff leadership of the board in this area had little tolerance for anything that resembled what they called Pentecostal theology. Back then no one had even heard of private prayer language. The private use of tongues was simply seen as just a different use of tongues. In short, no one was knowingly appointed with any such beliefs and few even applied.

In 1987 a popular couple was turned down for appointment because they claimed a private use of tongues. This may have been the first instance of it being called a private prayer language. The pressures arriving because of that decision caused some staff to rethink the approach and a decision was made that when someone claimed such a gift that they should be asked to write a letter explaining their use of tongues and to make a commitment to keep it private. That decision was made by staff in 1989.

In 1992, the trustee Mission Personnel Committee (MPC) asked how staff was dealing with tongues. They informed the MPC that people who spoke in tongues publicly would not be commissioned, but those using tongues in their prayer closet would still be sent to the mission field. The issue was discussed several times over the next ten years or so by this committee.

Concern by some trustees led to the matter being discussed by a subcommittee of the board called the Process Review Committee. After about three years of work they brought a recommendation to the Personnel Committee who then brought it to the board for a vote which passed by almost 75% in November of 2005.

What caused trustees to address this issue were complaints from some (not a majority) of our regions. Sources included some of our missionaries, complaints from pastors and seminary teams returning from mission trips, and observations by trustees returning from mission trips. Our President and some staff, however, dispute such problems, at least on the level claimed by these trustees.

The near consensus of the trustees was that a clear policy would prevent even small problems from growing to larger problems. Most of our trustees were church leaders in the sixties and seventies when such issues were splitting many churches in our Convention and they did not want to risk such damage on the field. They remembered that such church splits came from people who claimed they were not going to ever openly oppose the pastors or church leaders when they introduced their theology in private home meetings. But the result was a series of rifts and schisms that could have been avoided had a clear line been drawn early.

CTR: How does the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole approach or view the issue of tongues?

HATLEY: I am one of those who believe that there is still a strong majority of Southern Baptists who think that modern charismatic practices are not part of our history or our distinctives. There has been a growing number in the last two decades who have seen the need for an accommodation of such practices into our churches and agencies. This is driven, in my opinion, by the desire for acceptance in the greater evangelical community and in SBC

churches by the push for numbers. This second preoccupation caused many churches to no longer make theology an essential concern for its members, at least on the front end of membership.

Yet, again I say that such churches are not a majority and many pastor friends of mine have expressed regret in recent days for not making membership more meaningful. Many are seeing that a large membership does not make a church strong without a common theology that produces unity.

So how do we approach this issue? We must take the time to study, teach, and preach God's Word in regard to this subject. Two or three years of study, preaching, and dialogue will be healthy for us. Many have seen this day coming for a long time, and the strong emotional objections of some regarding the IMB policy merely reveal the reason we have not heretofore dealt with it. We knew there would be a strong reaction and we sought to avoid conflict. Well, that is now impossible; so, let's take a breath and deal with it.

CTR: What has been the reaction of the SBC missionaries who were appointed prior to the new guidelines, and still speak in tongues?

HATLEY: What reactions I know of have come primarily through our Regional Leaders. The chief concern was that the new policy would become retroactive, and threaten their status. This was discussed much by trustees throughout the policy revision. Because these existing missionaries were appointed under a different guideline it was thought to be fair to allow them to continue as long as they remain faithful to the existing staff policy that no charismatic practices or teachings should ever be public.

There were some regions where there was little or no reaction because there are few or no missionaries who speak in tongues. A few missionaries have been publicly outspoken concerning the new policy.

CTR: How has the new policy affected the number of candidates applying for SBC missionary appointments and the number of career missionaries leaving the field?

HATLEY: It is hard to gauge how many have not applied because of the change but there remain a great number of people who are in the pipeline from inquiry to actual appointment. The fact is that we need a larger budget to keep pace with the future missionaries who are surrendering to God's call.

Concerning those who are leaving the field in protest I know of only the possibility of a few who might not renew their work at the end of their current three or four year commitments.

CTR: How would the Apostle Paul, who restricted the public use of tongues yet personally "spoke in tongues more than you all" (presumably in private), fare as a missionary candidate under the new rules?

HATLEY: Paul would have no problem serving with the IMB. We based this policy on his teachings. My own interpretation of his work is to use the more simple and obvious interpretation in the context of that day, not ours. As such I substitute the word "language" everywhere the word "tongue" or "unknown tongue" appears. That is because the word used by Paul was *glossa* (from which we receive our word glossary). Paul spoke in many languages, known by his own studies and perhaps was, as a missionary, given the supernatural ability to speak to new language groups encountered on the field. In such an instance he would not understand the language he used but would know the Gospel was being given through his lips by a miracle, which also served to give authority to his message before the new crowd. He used these tongues in evangelism, which is the primary use of the gift of languages he lists in 1 Corinthians 14. Whether naturally, by study, or supernaturally if someone were to exhibit such great ability to communicate the gospel, then we would gladly skip the required year of language school and send them straight to the field.

I do not think Paul *restricted* the use of the gift to private use unless there was no opportunity to use it in evangelism or edification (in the church). In such private instances no one would be present who knew that language; so, the gift would remain private and not disrupt or add confusion to a public meeting.

This IMB policy does not restrict the miracle of Pentecost, where real languages were spoken. Today we can identify language through technology. If someone has the gift of tongues they should not restrict it to the closet. What a waste that would be. If it is of the Lord, then find the language or languages you have and take a one way flight to the country where that language is spoken. The IMB will send you there if you can pass the body/mass index standards and health exam.

CTR: How would you answer the charge that the new IMB policy against tongues exceeds the parameters set by the Baptist Faith and Message (2000), and thus allows an agency to set doctrinal standards?

HATLEY: Is it the intent of the Convention for the Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M) to be our parameters? I thought the articles of the BF&M were what the document itself claimed to be, and I quote from the 1925 confession which is restated in the preamble of the 2000 confession, "That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility." Further the preamble states "That the sole

authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”

As for setting doctrinal standards, both mission boards and the seminaries have guidelines and policies which should and must go beyond the BF&M. The reason being is that some subjects are not addressed in that precious document.

Two examples need to be cited. First, the North American Mission Board has had almost the exact policy on tongues as the IMB for a number of years. It passed with little fanfare because the circumstances and times were different when that was voted upon.

A second example comes from our own IMB. The staff has held to a policy for many years regarding charismatic practices. Dr. Rankin himself has upheld those standards by dismissing people from the field for open practice of what is considered charismatic theology. There is no Baptist Faith and Message article to condone such a policy but it was needed for the agency to go forward with its mission as prescribed by the Convention. The authority for such decisions was conferred by the Convention when these agencies were commissioned.

Let me also state that for a board to develop a policy that contradicts the Baptist Faith and Message would be an exercise in violation of the Convention’s purpose for that agency.

CTR: Pastor Wade Burlison (Enid, OK), an IMB Board member and vocal opponent of the new tongues policy, has not been appointed by the Chairman to any of the IMB committees for 2006–2007. This is seen by some critics as the Board’s attempt to marginalize him until his term expires. As the former Board Chairman, how would you respond to this interpretation?

HATLEY: Having worked with Brother Wade for many hours and days let me simply state that he cannot be marginalized. That is not the intent of the Chairman. Appointment to a committee is a privilege, not a right. Each of us serves where we serve at the request of the Chairman. The current Chairman, Dr. John Floyd, can speak for himself as to his reasons for this action. I did the same thing last year as Chairman.

My reasoning was that many had been offended and felt betrayed by Wade. Many on the board feared their comments in a meeting would end up on a blog, out of context, and under attack. They had good reason for such fears. Adding to the uneasiness was the fact that when such offenses were made known to Wade he would not apologize, nor offer a change in tactics. It is hard to be a trustee and a public critic of the trustees at the same time;

especially when as a new trustee you are making judgments without the benefit of historical context or the development of relationships.

These trustees are some of the best Southern Baptists on the earth. They are also a great cross-section of Southern Baptists. We have a good balance of laypeople, pastors, denominational servants, and even some former missionaries. We have not always agreed but have always been willing to forgive and maintain trust.

At the core of recent criticism is the theory that trustees are part of a conspiracy of a few people in the Convention who are trying to control everything in the Convention, including the replacement of Dr. Rankin. These godly trustees resent being described as “under the control of a few key leaders of the Convention” and as being given marching orders by those leaders on how to dismiss Dr. Rankin. These are Baptists. What makes them Baptists is that they think for themselves. The greatest insult is that they would be controlled by anyone except the Holy Spirit.

A second reason for my decision regarding Brother Wade is that he was not handling sensitive information well, even before his blogging began. Care must be taken in the use of much of our information. Many of our missionaries are in dangerous countries and too much information about them or their work or their locations can be gleaned by people surfing the web for targets.

There is no separate standard for Brother Wade. He is simply being asked to abide by the same standards of mutual accountability and the maintenance of trust to which every other trustee has agreed.

CTR: Another criticism from those on both sides of the issue is the fact that according to his own testimony IMB President Dr. Jerry Rankin has spoken in tongues for the past 30 years. That means he served as a SBC foreign missionary prior to 1991 (under a “no tongues” policy) and now as President (under the new “no tongues” policy). How can this be explained?

HATLEY: I do not know all the history of Dr. Rankin’s experience though I have talked with him about it on at least two occasions. As best I can tell he did not claim this experience when he was appointed but after he was on the field. It would be true that from the time of his first experience with this until about 1989 he would have served without being in balance with the administration. However, since he kept most of his experience private perhaps there was no knowledge of his experience by leadership.

Because the board, rather than the staff, has now enacted policy regarding this issue he would have some trouble being appointed as a new missionary

but he is exempt under the new policy because of the grandfathering of those appointed between 1989 and late 2005.

In essence the board has returned to the previous staff guidelines and has taken ownership of the interim period by not making the new policy retroactive. Dr. Rankin has been forthright in enforcing the “no public use of charismatic practices” guideline when it is brought to his attention.

Let me say that this is not the ideal situation. The first intention of the board was to make this a guideline at the committee level where it would have more flexibility and would be less of a point of public conflict with the experience of Dr. Rankin. When this passed at the committee level a demand was made by Wade Burleson and Dr. Rankin that this must be voted on at the full board level. I think they thought that with the public pressure that was brought upon the board that the vote would be different. Instead the vote was nearly 75% in favor of the policy. Everyone should be reminded that this was not done to embarrass Dr. Rankin. Leaders, other than the trustees who voted for this policy, have forced it into the public arena.

One point that is insulting to the trustees is how one trustee has claimed the vote at the board level was made in order to embarrass Dr. Rankin when that person knew that he himself had insisted on the more public vote. Such deception is intentional and every other trustee knows that. Again, we have a trust issue.

This board loves Dr. Rankin and we resent the false portrayal in public by one or two of our own to the contrary. Out of 89 trustees there may be seven or eight that would like to have Dr. Rankin replaced and who might even try to slant things to make that happen sooner rather than later. But to characterize the 75% who voted on this policy in that light is the knowing extension of a falsehood and reflects a personal agenda that is an affront to this board and to the SBC.

Think about it. If 75% of this board wants Dr. Rankin replaced would they need to put forward an issue to embarrass him? Not at all. They would simply tell him it is time to leave. Dr. Rankin has said repeatedly that he serves at the pleasure of the board and that is as true today as ever before.

CTR: One of the concerns of the younger pastors, especially those trying to do evangelism in a postmodern context, is that by narrowing the doctrinal lines on secondary issues, the SBC is moving out of the mainstream of evangelicalism and is becoming the new voice of fundamentalism. Would you agree with this characterization, and why or why not?

HATLEY: I do not agree. I think Southern Baptists as a whole have not significantly moved at all. I do feel that evangelicalism is drifting left and

that as it drifts we will appear to be less in the mainstream due to no fault of our own. As I mentioned before, some churches have weakened their requirements for membership in the search for larger numbers. But this is not our majority and I see the signs of repentance among many of those pastors. If this revival takes hold I can foresee a decade of celebrating churches for being spiritually and doctrinally strong rather than being merely greatly populated.

I have taught some for one of our seminaries and I have a great deal of confidence in these young pastors. Most are not like the few that have of late made a name for themselves by stirring strife among the brethren. Most have no SBC agenda but only the desire to build a doctrinally sound, missions-minded, soul-winning church. They are risk takers and they are exciting. May their tribe increase. Such men of God should have no problem with what our board has done because it is both biblically based and rooted in SBC precedent.

And by the way, we have never been in the center of the mainstream of evangelicalism. We have always held to the right edge of the mainstream. In fact, I see Southern Baptists as the anchor for the evangelical community. If we drift to center stream we send the whole community even further left and weaken Christianity around the world.

CTR: Because the new tongues policy was implemented under your chairmanship, you naturally became the target of much criticism. How did you hold up under such pressure?

HATLEY: There was never a moment of despair. Optimism was given to me, perhaps supernaturally, throughout my entire tenure as Chairman. A big reason for my spirits remaining high is that I have a great wife and family who know how to balance me. I also have a great church which not only shared me with the Convention but encouraged their pastor on every hand.

Another point of assistance relates to my training. When I was a student at the Criswell College in the mid-seventies the school was slightly controversial. When I attended a second time in the early eighties the school was swimming in controversy. Some of my master’s degree courses were with Dr. Patterson and one was small enough that we met in his office. I would see firsthand his reactions to harsh and unjust criticism. We would see him take phone calls during class that were of major importance to the Kingdom. Throughout even the darkest hours and unfair treatment by the press he and the faculty remained focused on the big picture and refused to let intended hurts achieve their goals. I took more than just written notes during those days.

Our Convention is not a stranger to controversy and our people, when given time, will see the truth and will react with great commitment to our mission. Knowing that from the beginning helped me to not overreact to the criticism.

CTR: What were some of the threats and unjust criticisms you received?

HATLEY: Well, one of the most amusing was that I was told my career as a Southern Baptist leader was over. I didn't know if that was a promise or a threat. Never did I seek such. My appointment as Chairman was at the insistence of my fellow trustees. I did not seek it in any way and have no desire today to be anything other than the pastor of my dear church, and that calling is larger than our Convention.

There were some pretty vile and unchristian things said in both personal correspondence and on blogs and such. After writing a position paper on the reasoning for the policy that refuted, with documentation, most of the misinformation of its critics, namely that former Baptist leaders were pro-tongues, there were some really personal things said in public on the blogs. I was called stupid, and guilty of writing the most illogical and ignorant paper, and that I was a hindrance to the Gospel who should not be a leader of anything. My response was silence. I know that when people of passion lose an argument their only recourse is to attack personally because they can no longer attack the truth.

A few wrote to tell me that they had a word from the Lord that I was to spend eternity in hell for my work as Chairman. One or two accused me of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit for not allowing people with charismatic practices to serve as IMB missionaries.

Most however who wrote to question the policy were very polite and open to receiving more information. I tried to respond to those who requested a response and many who did not request such. In each case I tried to thank them for their concerns and asked them to pray for me as I worked with the board and the SBC on this issue. In many instances a second correspondence would be very kind and often apologetic. People would say things like, "I reread my letter at the bottom of your kind response and I am ashamed of the things I said and . . ." In many instances I won a friend even when we had yet to agree on the subject matter.

No one realizes more than I the emotional charge that is attached to this issue. But we can disagree without losing our love for one another. When we lose that we lose not only our fellowship but our witness.