

Assessment of the IMB Prayer Language Policy

Every institution has policies and procedures that the adherents to that institution are expected to follow. The International Mission Board (IMB) is no different. One such policy that has recently been adopted by the IMB is a policy regarding the use of tongues in worship and prayer languages. Much can be said about both of these issues; however, this essay seeks to identify the value of such a policy on these issues and to critique the IMB's stance on these two issues.

Regarding the value of such a policy, it is important that the IMB have procedures in place in order to regulate its members. Every member that goes into a land under the banner of the IMB represents the beliefs of that organization and is not just an ambassador to Christ in the country of their deployment, but also is an ambassador of the organization to which they belong. It is important, therefore, for policies to exist that identify the beliefs of the IMB and that direct its missionaries in conduct regarding such beliefs. Otherwise, those missionaries should proceed with their mission as "free agents" securing their own support for that mission. The IMB is a special organization and those missionaries that go into the mission field under the IMB are especially blessed to have an organization that fully funds their salaries and missions expenses. One only has to study the great missionaries of the past like Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong to see that there existed a time when missionaries did not have the luxury of having an organization fully fund their entire mission. Lottie Moon had to raise a large portion of her expenses to sail to China and to buy property for a school building to be erected on her own. The IMB was very limited in the funds that it had to give out. Thus, any missionary that is going to take full advantage of the resources that the IMB as an organization has to offer, should certainly be willing to conduct themselves in a manner that is consistent with the beliefs of such an

organization. As afore mentioned, these individuals represent not only themselves, but the IMB as well in their conduct.

Having a policy is great, only insofar as the policy itself is built on firm biblical principles. There are two major areas of emphasis regarding the IMB policy regarding the use of tongues in worship and private prayer languages. These two areas are the interpretation of glossolalia and what guidelines should be employed in its use and whether or not a private prayer language exists.

Regarding glossolalia, there are two major interpretations regarding this. One is that the gift that is referred to in the New Testament as the gift of tongues is glossolalia, that is the use of utterances that are unintelligible to the speaker, and perhaps even the listener, and the use of xenoglossy, which is the speaking of a known language in which the listeners are well aware of what is being said, as well as possibly the speaker. The IMB supports the latter interpretation regarding what is meant by the gift of tongues. The IMB's policy is that if anyone is currently practicing tongues in the position of anything other than xenoglossy, they have disqualified themselves from serving as a representative of the IMB. Once again the terminology is important in that the IMB is not discrediting anyone's calling to the mission field, nor is it suggesting that anyone who holds to a different view should not be allowed to practice missions. They are simply forbidden from representing the IMB, because the IMB does not share the same views. From this critic's interpretation and understanding of what the Scriptures teach regarding the gift of tongues and the context surrounding its uses, it seems that the IMB has correctly interpreted the Scriptures such as Acts 2:1-13 and 1 Corinthians 14.

The second issue regarding the use of a private prayer language is one that is much more difficult to critique. Much of the disagreement on this second aspect of the use of tongues has to

do with the fact that this is not a public practice, but a private one. If this were the case all of the time, then it would not be publically known that an individual practiced such a prayer language. Many have come to understand Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 to be referring to two phenomena, that of public tongues and that of a private prayer language. It appears that the IMB is not as certain regarding the use of this gift, as it is regarding the public use of tongues. This reviewer personally holds to the interpretation held by the IMB, that prayer is to be made with understanding, and it does not seem that there are many Scriptures that support prayer that is not intelligible to the one offering up prayer. The only such Scripture that comes to mind is that of Romans 8:26 that speaks of the Holy Spirit praying on our behalf with groaning that words cannot express. Despite the apparent misuse of this verse to support private prayer languages, the one who is praying is the Holy Spirit and not the individual. This critic does not feel that it is of any benefit to the individual to make a prayer that is unintelligible to himself, for how else will he know when that prayer is answered in order that he might give praise to God. Also, the gifts that are spoken of as spiritual gifts were gifts that were for the benefit of the entire congregation. It does not logically follow that Paul would include one gift that is only for the benefit of the individual, if such a benefit can be derived from such a gift. There does not seem to be any actual mention of the use of any of the saints practicing this gift of a private prayer language, though many of the saints have conversed with God in private, as indeed we all should. That this supposed gift is one that is private and not public, and should therefore not be scrutinized by the IMB does not seem to be a convincing argument, since such an argument would not need to be made if the gift were truly private. No one would then be aware of such a gift. This supposed weakness in the policy is actually only a mirage.

Haywood, Matthew
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It appears that the IMB is being very fair regarding this doctrinal issue by not rescinding the endorsement of the IMB on any such missionaries that are practicing this gift in the field that have already been assigned prior to the issuance of this policy. Also, the IMB does reserve the right to make exception to these guidelines. That being said and with regards to the purpose of such a policy on either of these issues, this critic believes that the IMB is well within its bounds to make such a policy and to enforce such a policy while remaining true to the Great Commission. Any policy will have its strengths and weaknesses, since imperfect man is the architect behind such policies, but this one policy seems to be a well thought out and fair policy. It seems to this critic that this is a policy that will stand the test of time.