

SBC poll: Half of pastors say 'tongues' valid: "Continualists" weigh in

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A survey sample of senior pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention found that exactly half of them say speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift given to some believers today— whether those utterances occur in public worship or are “private prayer languages,” a term used in an escalating dispute within the denomination.

The findings came from LifeWay Christian Resources, an SBC agency known for its church education resources, and were released June 1—only days before the divisive issue was expected to arise at the June 12-13 annual meeting of Southern Baptists.

As Pentecostal and charismatic movements have grown in the past 100 years, the SBC has steadfastly denied the authenticity of modern-day glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Its leaders have backed the theory that such spiritual gifts as described in the New Testament were legitimate only in the early years of the church.

The LifeWay research, gathered in April and May, included findings from 1,004 Protestant laity, 405 Southern Baptist senior pastors and 600 non-SBC Protestant senior pastors. The pastors and laity were not asked if they engage in tongues-speaking.

In the survey, 50 percent of Southern Baptist pastors answered yes and 43 percent said no to the question: “Do you believe that the Holy Spirit gives some people the gift of a special language to pray to God privately? Some people refer to this as a private prayer language or the ‘private use of tongues.’” Seven percent of the pastors interviewed said they didn’t know.

Furthermore, 66 percent of the non-SBC Protestant senior pastors and 51 percent of Protestant laypeople believe in the validity of a private prayer language, according to the research.

The report received immediate attention from young SBC pastors who have used blogs to further their cause against a year-old International Mission Board guideline prohibiting the hiring of new missionaries who admit to praying in a private prayer language.

Alan Cross, in a June 1 blog post, wrote that the data suggest that SBC leaders were mistaken when they maintained that a “continualist” position on spiritual gifts—the belief that miraculous gifts given during the time of the apostles can still be used in the modern era—was “an extreme minority position in Southern Baptist life.

“For the past year-and-a-half, we have heard repeatedly from proponents of the IMB policies-guidelines that they were in the vast majority in Southern Baptist life. This study proves that they are clearly wrong,” said Cross, pastor of Gateway Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. “Southern Baptists are very divided over this issue, and there is a wide range of opinion.”

Ed Stetzer, LifeWay’s director of research, said the report showed “significant openness” to private prayer languages in the denomination. Stetzer also noted that the “middle ground is not that large” on the issue.

Brad Waggoner, vice president of research, said he had not expected such a high number of “cessationist” pastors to emerge—people who believe the ability to perform miraculous acts ended with the apostles. The figure was 41 or 43 percent, depending on how the question was posed. Recent seminary graduates polled, however, leaned more to the cessationist view (55 percent).

At least one critic questioned the survey’s methodology and motives. Malcolm Yarnell, assistant dean for theological studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the questions regarding private prayer practices were vague and made certain assumptions about the “gift” of tongues. “[What] has been shared with the public is insufficient for a thorough analysis of the survey itself,” Yarnell wrote. – *Associated Baptist Press*