

**Commentary on the LifeWay
Research Division Study of
Private Prayer Language**

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“A Perfect and Just Measure Shalt Thou Have”

Prior to recognizing and surrendering to the call of God upon my life, I was a practicing economist and financier. Statistics and accounting—the discipline of mathematics applied to social trends and the management of money—were the focus of my daily thoughts and deeds. The statistical side of economics in comparison with the reporting side of accounting brought greater joy to this former practitioner of the financial arts as economics involves understanding human behavior. Yet, like other social scientists, economists deal with both the measurable and the immeasurable precisely because they are dealing with the attitudes and actions of human beings.

The social sciences have long had a mysterious hold on the American imagination, because their scientists are deemed the experts who know the people better than the people know themselves. The mystique of the statistical disciplines—economics, political science, sociology, etc.—is enhanced by a modernist pretense that true scientific disciplines depend upon mathematics, unlike those disciplines that involve more variable factors—psychology, history, journalism, etc. The Enlightenment taught the inhabitants of Western cultures implicitly to trust the mathematical and doubt the non-mathematical. At a popular level, this means, *inter alia*, that a “scientific” study or statistical survey in an Enlightenment culture carries substantial authority.

Yet the mathematical is subject to the foibles introduced by humanity’s created limitations and, even more debilitatingly, by its chosen depravity. These theological truths—humanity’s limitations and depravity—were brought home to me in the field of economics. It quickly became apparent that statistics may be inappropriately constructed or interpreted, whether with or without cognition, by the social scientist. In other words, some studies are worthy of more trust than others, due to the manipulation of the data to which the mathematical tools of statistical analysis are applied. Moreover, no study may claim perfection, simply because social studies are human endeavors involving human subjects, human objects, and human agents.

Statisticians are taught to qualify their results by assigning variation measures—for instance, “this study has a 98% confidence factor and 3.2% sampling error”. To the layman, such measures appear to deepen the trustworthiness of the survey, while to the professional, they may serve merely as so much preliminary window-dressing. The Word of God is less confident regarding the ability of human beings to declare themselves possessive of a high confidence factor and low error rate. Of the economist and financier, as of any other social scientist, God demands one set of weights “in thy bag” and a “perfect and just” set of weights at that (Deut. 25:13-16). God commanded his people to engage in, not just honest and consistent math, but perfect and just math. My own

experience with statistics taught me that obtaining and utilizing a “perfect and just” set of measures is a very difficult, if not ultimately impossible, task. Every step that involves human decisions opens the door further for the loss of perfection.

In a statistical survey, critical decisions have to be made from the very beginning that may obfuscate rather than elucidate the answer one seeks. For instance, one must decide how to ask a particular question for which an answer is sought; whether to accept this stream of data or that; how to filter data properly; when to trust the study of another or commission a new study. When dealing with surveys of human opinions rather than the raw data of sales and purchases, the problems become especially difficult, for the way a question is asked and who is asked the question and who asks the question and exactly what question is asked may skew the results of a survey one way or another. This does not mean that the pollsters that I hired were necessarily untrustworthy, but that human factors necessarily distort, often quite unintentionally. Moreover, the final step in a statistical survey—interpreting the data—introduces non-mathematical factors that cannot be allayed by high confidence factors and low sampling errors. Confidence and sampling error estimates regard only the relation between the sample and the subject population. These estimates, which may be and often are wrong, say nothing about the surveyor’s intentions.

Yesterday, the difficulties inherent in the social sciences, especially those that seek to conduct their business with recourse to the apparently unarguable results of statistics, were brought to mind once again.

“For It Is Not Ye That Speak, But the Spirit”

Private prayer languages are a controversial issue among some Southern Baptists at this point in our history. The International Mission Board of Trustees [IMB] and the Trustees of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary [SWBTS] have made it clear that private prayer languages are not to be countenanced among new employees of those institutions. Yet, a leading administrator of the IMB has publicly affirmed private prayer languages and a prominent trustee at SWBTS believes the denial of private prayer languages is unbiblical. And today, the administration of LifeWay, the old Baptist Sunday School Board, released a study by its new Research Division.

The study, a statistical opinion survey, is entitled, “Private Prayer Language and the Gift of Tongues: Protestant Pastors and Laity and Southern Baptist Seminary Graduates.” It has been released, most intriguingly, right before the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention [SBC] in San Antonio, Texas, where the issue of private prayer languages promises to appear on the agenda from the floor. The timing of the study’s release is problematic, but even more problematic is the study itself, both in methodology and in interpretation. For instance, with regard to methodology, some of the questions that are asked are woefully inadequate, and the fact that two surveys were combined into one report further complicates the picture.

Methodological Problems with Question Two

For instance, question two is the critical one from which the surveyors concluded, “Half of Southern Baptist pastors believe in Private Prayer Language.” Unfortunately,

such a conclusion is essentially without substantive meaning. Indeed, the question itself may be affirmed by a person who does not believe that ecstatic, unintelligible speech directed toward God actually is a spiritual gift defined by Scripture.

Q2 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.”

The question is unclear as to its meaning, first with regard to meaning of “the gift”: (A) Is the “gift” to be taken as one of the *charismata* discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14? Or, (B) is the “gift” to be taken as one of the graces that accompany the reception of the Holy Spirit at salvation? Or, (C) is the “gift” to be taken as one of the common graces applied to human beings by the Holy Spirit by reason of their creation?

A second problem with clarity in the second question concerns the meaning of “special language”: (A) Is the “special language” to be taken as a heavenly, angelic language previously unknown to the speaker? Or, (B) is the “special language” a learned language that has been heightened in understanding by reason of the Spirit’s guidance? Or, (C) is the “special language” to be taken as the “barking of a dog” or the “croaking of a frog” in emulation of the Toronto Blessing and its rather bizarre manifestations?

Although it is public knowledge that Malcolm Yarnell most certainly does not believe a private prayer language as ecstatic, unintelligible speech to be a spiritual gift defined in Scripture,¹ *even I could answer the second LifeWay Research Division question affirmatively by opting for B in both of the above instances.* After all, I do believe that the Holy Spirit comes at salvation as the gift of God and that he brings to me many graces as a result of salvation (Romans 8). Moreover, I do believe that the Spirit helps every Christian pray to God rightly (Ephesians 6:18) and that the Spirit is promised to help us speak our own language intelligibly in witness of the Gospel, for instance when persecuted (Matthew 10:17-20). Yet, I would vehemently disagree with “special language” being the barking of a dog, and I find the neo-Pentecostal idea that unintelligible private language is a spiritual gift to be biblically insupportable.

Another problem with this question is the terminology of “some people”. Is “some” to be taken as a Christian elitism? Or, are these “people” Christians or not?

Finally, perhaps the greatest problem with the second question is its blatant assumption that a “gift” may be used “privately”. Paul is quite clear in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that a spiritual gift is for the common good, and he spends much of chapter 14 arguing that speaking gifts must be used only for public edification. *The questionnaire’s equation of “gift” with “privately” may suggest that the surveyor himself (or herself) believes that a private activity is a spiritual gift.* Not only is such an equation indicative of either an inappropriately constructed or insufficiently educated survey, it suggests an implied contradiction of the Pauline doctrine of spiritual gifts.

¹See White Paper 8 “Speaking of ‘Tongues,’ What Does the Bible Teach?” on www.BaptistTheology.org.

Methodological Problems with Question Four

Also worthy of consideration regarding the survey's methodology is question four, concerning the definition of "tongues". Question four does not directly address the critical issue at stake, but bypasses it in favor of less controversial matters.

Q4 Which one of the following two options best describes your understanding of the term "tongues" used in the New Testament? 1. "Tongues" refers to the God-given ability to speak another language you had not previously been able to speak, 2. "Tongues" refers to special utterances given by the Holy Spirit meant as messages to the congregation with the help of an interpreter.

The question does not even offer the option that is most critical in the current debate. A balanced survey would have given this as a third option: "3. 'Tongues' refers to ecstatic, unintelligible utterances given by the Holy Spirit to only certain believers for their private edification." After all, this is what current proponents of private prayer languages admittedly mean when they refer to "tongues".

If I, as a surveyor, wanted to confuse rather than clarify the issues at stake, I would not directly address the critical issue. Unfortunately, the questionnaire effectively leaves the primary issue at stake unaddressed and opts for questions that may be affirmed without great controversy. Moreover, if I wanted to confuse rather than clarify the issue at stake, I would ask a question that might be answered not as an "either-or" but as a "both-and". Although I would not personally affirm number two, there are sincere Baptists who are not neo-Pentecostals that would.

Perhaps the question's lack of clarity due to insufficient breadth of options explains why the responses were all over the place. It should be noticed that many opted for a third response that was not even given as an option: "Don't know." The fourth question, like the second question, leaves the issue more confused than clarified. It is reported that Ed Stetzer responded to the survey by noting that there are "two sizeable yet contradictory positions among SBC pastors." My response would be that the contradiction is not with the respondents, but with the questionnaire itself. *The survey's methodology is such that it does not clarify the issue, but confuses it.*

Two Surveys, Not One

Another problem with the methodology of the survey is that it was not conducted by one surveyor, nor was it even a single survey. Rather, LifeWay has combined the results of two surveys that were independently conducted by separate surveyors. This introduces yet further problems that prompted one of the surveyors to conclude that the pastors of the Southern Baptist Convention appear to be contradictory. The problem, however, may be that the surveys themselves are contradictory.

"Be Ye Therefore Wise as Serpents, and Harmless as Doves"

The command of Jesus in Matthew 10:16 is one that Southern Baptists need to take to heart. Engaging in theological discourse demands both wisdom and innocence.

The recent survey on private prayer languages conducted by LifeWay's Research division is a singular disappointment. The survey and its release are alternately methodologically insufficient and denominationally unwise. Whatever the real intent of LifeWay's administration in releasing such a report at this time, it certainly gives the appearance of theological partisanship rather than innocence. Why did the surveyors construct the second question so that almost anybody could answer it positively? Why did the surveyors not offer a response in the fourth question regarding the critical issue at stake? Why did the surveyors combine two surveys, which probably followed different methodologies? There are other questions, but alas, what has been shared with the public is insufficient for a thorough analysis of the survey itself. Unfortunately, few people will look into the methodology utilized, and even fewer will understand that the survey itself is theologically inadequate, perhaps even theologically skewed. What many people will remember is that apparently half of our pastors now believe in private prayer languages. LifeWay should conduct a sweeping review of its research methodology.

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