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A Parting of Paths:

An Examination of the Doctrinal Controversy in the Taiwanese Mission Field with
Particular Reference to Missionary Timothy Meier

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It is fitting to inform the reader of the precise scope of this particular essay. It is not a doctrinal brief attempting to support or refute one side of the doctrines under dispute.¹ On the contrary, it is a historical overview of dispute that had a profound impact on many individual's lives and on an entire mission field. The author's goal is to lay out the progression of the discussions over the issue and to present the position of either side as accurately as possible. This essay will make particular reference to one of the missionaries who would conviction on the disputed matter would eventually lead him to resign his call as missionary and his membership in the WELS—Timothy Meier. The reasons for focusing on Missionary Meier are not his preeminent role in introduction or development of the teachings under dispute. Indeed, by his own account this did not begin with him.² Rather, the reasons for focusing on him are his presence in the mission field throughout the entirety of this dispute, his availability to the author, his willingness to discuss the events in question and the desirability of a first-hand perspective of the events.

In the 1980's the Taiwan mission field was still relatively new and showed promise as the Lord's Word was sown there. By 1986 there were already two missionaries in the field, Robert Meister and Ralph Jones. Missionary Robert Siirila had been called and would be in the field by year's end. Pastor Chen of the national Christian Lutheran Evangelical Church (CLEC) was also working with our expatriate missionaries in Taiwan. Three national students were being

¹ For the sake of honesty it should, however, be noted that the author's personal conviction is that the teaching represented in this essay as "WELS" or "the Synod's" is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. It is with this assumption that the Synod's position will be presented.

² Personal Correspondence—Email from Timothy Meier to Albert Meier, December 8, 2007.

trained for church work and the field showed signs that more men would be needed to take advantage of the opportunities the Holy Spirit was making available.³

By 1988 a fourth missionary, David Kriehn⁴, was called to Taiwan and 1989 Timothy Meier became the fifth missionary to the field.⁵ In Taiwan both the Mandarin dialect of Chinese and Taiwanese are widely spoken. Taiwanese is more common among the middle class is a difficult language to learn. The initial work in had been done in Mandarin, but with the additional manpower desired to reach out in Taiwanese as well. To this end Missionary Meier was trained in Taiwanese.⁶ The outlook in Taiwan remained quite positive to the extent that a synod report refers to it as a “hot field” and concludes: “God’s blessing is apparent and abundant, for which we rejoice and give thanks.⁷ By the end of 1993, LeAnn Eyerman, a lay worker had joined the team, Missionary Kevin Stellick had been called to replace Robert Meister who had been called to Thailand that summer.⁸ It was in this period of time that the disputed teachings started to come to light, both to the missionaries as they struggled with the increasingly difficult task of reaching out⁹ and personal experiences that caused them to reexamine what Scripture taught concerning tongues and extraordinary spiritual gift and to Board for World Missions (as represented by the Executive Committee for Southeast Asia—SEA EC) to whom

³ 1986 Report to the Twelve Districts, 64-65.

⁴ 1988 Report to the Twelve Districts, 55.

⁵ 1990 Report to the Twelve Districts, 134-135.

⁶ Personal Correspondence—Email from Timothy Meier to Albert Meier, December 8, 2007 and also telephone conversation between the same on December 8, 2007.

⁷ 1990 Report to the Twelve Districts, 134-135.

⁸ 1994 Report to the Twelve Districts, 79.

⁹ Timothy Meier reflects on some of the cultural factors that led to Taiwan being a more difficult field than was originally perceived, “Personally, they are very friendly, polite. [...] We almost never met with any antagonism to the fact that WE were Christians. But that didn’t mean they should be. [...] Because they are often so polite, friendly, missionaries are often deceived into thinking that they have gotten closer to them—and led them closer to faith in Jesus than they really have. They will treat you well, not disagree with you, but that doesn’t mean they have really accepted what you say or are ready to make such a major change in their faith/life. One friend used the example of the hallway, living room and kitchen. Basically, visitors to your house will be let into the hallway, guests are welcome in the living room, but only friends are welcome in the kitchen—or get a tour of the house. It’s very easy to be visitor or even a guest in the life of a Chinese, but a deep friend relationship is harder than it looks.” Personal Correspondence—Email from Timothy Meier to Albert Meier, December 8, 2007.

the missionaries turned for guidance and for vindication in the understanding of spiritual gifts which they were forming.¹⁰

What does Scripture teach us to expect with regard to extraordinary spiritual gifts such as those given by the Holy Spirit to the early Christian Church? This was the question at the heart of discussions that would follow in 1993 and 1994. By the end of 1992 Ralph Jones, Dave Kriehn and Leann Eyerman felt they had seen and experienced these gifts personally.¹¹ In December 1992, Daniel Koelpin, chairman of the SEA EC, ask the missionary team to conduct themselves in keeping with eight specific points until they could come to a more conclusive understanding on the subject. In points 1 and 2, Kriehn and Jones are asked discontinue meeting with a group and an individual outside the WELS fellowship. Apparently these acquaintances had been formed on the basis of shared experiences of receiving extraordinary experiences. Point 3 asks the entire team to prayerful continue their study of Scripture on this issue. Point 4 asked that they avoid terminology that might be misunderstood or cause division in the church and point 5 that they keep a low profile for the same reasons. Points 6 and 7 requested the team to heed scriptural guidelines in regards to the use of spiritual gifts (humility, etc.) and attach no more or less importance to these gifts than does Scripture. Point 8 asked the team to be honest and up front with the Synod, to express disagree with Synod and its teachings to synodical officials and not to pursue an agenda within the national church in Taiwan and finally to resign if irreconcilable difference were indeed found.¹²

Initially the missionary team agree to this points, though Kriehn and Siirila expressed discomfort with particular points or uncertainty as to their application. Continued correspondence failed to reach a definitive conclusion so on July 13 and 14 Ralph Jones, David

¹⁰ Fax from Dan Koelpin to SEA EC, Prof. Valleskey, Dave Kriehn, Ralph Jones, Leann Eyerman, July 8, 1993.

¹¹ Minutes of "Special" Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 2ff.

¹² Fax from Dan Koelpin to SEA EC, Prof. Valleskey, Dave Kriehn, Ralph Jones, Leann Eyerman, July 8, 1993, 2.

Kriehn and Leann Eyerman met with SEA EC members Koelpin, Haag and Dolan and Professor David Valleskey of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.¹³ This meeting and especially the four possible¹⁴ teachings delineated with regards to extraordinary spiritual gifts would frame the language for the remainder of the controversy.

The meeting began with Eyerman, Jones and Kriehn separately relating the experiences they had with regard to extraordinary gifts from the Holy Spirit¹⁵. Eyerman said she had experienced “the phenomenon of prayer which involved, at times, unintelligible sounds/music of joy/praise.”¹⁶ This occurred in private and Eyerman did not feel it was appropriate for public worship. She felt the Lord spoke to her, not in words as such, but on occasion bringing to mind portions of Scripture or hymns in response to specific prayers. She also felt she had “the gift of perception/encouragement when counseling individuals” which she describes as being able to know where people are when counseling and being able to specific encouragement.¹⁷ She also had a dream/vision on a couple occasions of 11 puzzle pieces coming together and then separating which seemed to coincide with the mission team’s coming together in a “oneness” and then separating as the Meisters departed for Thailand.¹⁸ She found that these, especially the praying, brought her a sense of peace and were accompanied by a growing in her faith and in her boldness to reach out with the gospel. She also “sees the danger of ‘spotlighting’ extraordinary gifts with in the church and does not see this happening at this time.”¹⁹

¹³ Fax from Dan Koelpin to SEA EC, Prof. Valleskey, Dave Kriehn, Ralph Jones, Leann Eyerman, July 8, 1993.

¹⁴ By “possible” is meant positions into which are Christians can be divided. Both parties acknowledged that two of this possible positions lack Scriptural support.

¹⁵ In order to better understand what the mission team understood when referring to extraordinary spiritual gifts I have included a relatively extensive list of their experiences. The mission team, even those who eventually left the synod, recognized the dangers of the extremes of found in certain charismatic groups.

¹⁶ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 2.

¹⁷ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 2.

¹⁸ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 3.

¹⁹ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 2-4.

Both Eyerman and Jones related an incident they had experienced regarding a Chinese girl named Sandy. Sandy was apparently possessed by a demon, speaking in the third person and knowing things about Eyerman she had no natural way of knowing. Three years ago Eyerman had witnessed her being exorcised at a Chinese Christian church. Some time later when she and Jones had contact with Sandy, she appeared to be possessed again. After a Chinese worship service, Eyerman Jones and some “mature” Christians prayed and demanded the spirit leave, which it seems to have done. There was a marked change in Sandy’s appearance and spiritual attitude and she stopped referring to herself in the third person.²⁰

Jones stated that he felt his “personal journey” began about six years prior as he prepared for teaching in the Taiwan Seminary. At this time he began to read Scriptures an hour each day. Again, two years prior to the meeting, Jones found himself at odds with the Taiwan mission leader. At that time he received a call to Vancouver and was inclined to accept it until he felt the Holy Spirit brought certain Scriptures to mind in a very vivid and special way that led him to return the call. He twice experienced a “day dream” that depicted himself, Kriehn and Eyerman in prayer opposing some strong evil. In another occasion, while in prayer Jones heard a voice tell him “no drinking!” Jones felt that he has at times struggled in this area. He asked Eyerman to pray for him concerning this and she returned with the same command. Jones did feel this was necessarily a Nazarite vow but perhaps something close to it.²¹ Jones had not at this point experienced speaking in tongues and did not necessarily desire it or view it as necessary. Jones felt the gifts he experienced came from the Lord and together with study of the Scripture have strengthened his relationship to the Lord and to his fellow missionaries. Jones also indicated that

²⁰ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 2-3, 5.

²¹ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 5.

to that point there had not been any such experiences among the Chinese members of the mission nor were the members or Pastor Chen striving for such extraordinary/spectacular gifts.²²

Kriehn also related the different extraordinary spiritual gifts he had witnessed and experienced. In the fall of 1990 he experienced a jostling sensation while praying and his whole body began to tingle. He described it as a “wonderful” sensation. He did not share the experience with others, but it gave him a renewed zeal for sometime. A while later, when a “closer walk with God seemed to slip away,”²³ Kriehn fasted for five days until he experienced the same sensation. About this time Kriehn was made Mission Coordinator and felt through these experience received the gift of leadership. He continued to experience the tingling during prayer and came to understand it as an affirmation of a particular decision after which that decision become the right one. He felt this has led him deeper into God’s Word and continues to fast on occasion. He said that these gifts do not make one a better Christian, nor does a lack of them make one a lesser Christian. Up to this time none of the missionaries’ wives had experienced such gifts and neither had Missionary Meier although he feels he is growing in his faith.²⁴

The second day was occupied with Scriptural Study regarding spiritual gifts as well as a study of the Lutheran Confessions on the same topic. Rev. Dolan, in his minutes for the meeting summarizes it as follows:

In the course of the discussion there was general agreement that the Scripture is not conclusive on the matter of whether spiritual gifts evidenced in the Apostolic era were to cease after that age was completed. While a number of passages seemed to imply that the gifts would cease, others appeared to at least leave open the possibility of their continuance. It could be said that the opinions regarding the continuance of the more unusual spiritual gifts described in the pages of the New Testament fall into four groupings.

²² Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 6-7.

²³ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 8.

²⁴ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 8-9.

1. Those who believe that such gifts as the revelatory gifts (prophecy, visions, dreams, and the direct proclamation from God or for God), the gift of tongues, the ability to exorcise demons, to perform miraculous healing or to be safe from the bites of serpents have ceased.

2. Those who are inclined to believe that such gifts have ceased, but allow for the possibility of their appearance in our time as their existence is not altogether excluded in the Scripture. Their hesitancy to embrace the existence and/or use of these unusual gifts comes from the long history of doctrinal aberration often associated with those claiming to have such gifts.

3. Those who are inclined to believe such gifts exist in our time, but who allow that they may not since Scripture has not spoken conclusively and clearly on this matter. They are sympathetic to the doctrinal concerns of the second group.

4. Those who believe that such gifts do exist and have no sympathy with those who question their existence and use.²⁵

Thereafter these four positions would frequently be referenced as a explanation for was belief one held concerning these gift. Both the SEA EC and the missionaries recognized that positions 1 and 4 say more than Scripture does. SEA EC and WELS public confession are appropriately characterized as position 2 while Kriehn, Jones and Eyerman identified with position 3. As the meeting concluded the SEA EC asked the following of the missionaries: that they continue to abide by the eight points established in 1992, that they maintain a “sharp distinction between pious and public opinion and public doctrine on the matter of unusual phenomena,”²⁶ and that they maintain a low profile so this controversy can be dealt with privately.²⁷ For its part the SEA EC agreed to defend the team to all who might question their doctrinal integrity, to give them the support and confidence needed to carry out their work in Taiwan and remove the apprehensions

²⁵ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 12.

²⁶ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 13. This point was later to become a point of contention. The SEA EC viewed a pious opinion as one allowed by Scripture but lacking the authority to be taught publicly as doctrine. The missionaries would struggle with how something can be an appropriate understanding of Scripture but cannot be taught publicly.

²⁷ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 13. The minutes indicate that if the controversy went “high profile” the SEA EC indicated that they would have to make a decision. They appeared to be applying the distinction between loving admonition and encouragement for brothers who are struggling or erring and public expulsion of false teachers. By going “high profile” or championing their beliefs publicly they would be putting themselves in the latter category.

over their livelihoods and futures since the matter has been “properly addressed and resolved to the fullest extent feasible.”²⁸

With this understanding the missionaries and the SEA EC parted, both believing and hoping that the disagreements were behind them. Unfortunately this was not the case. Already the issue was bigger than Jones, Kriehn and Eyerman. Missionary Siirila was not present at the July 1993 meeting, but was follow the discussion as he was working through the issues for himself.²⁹ Missionary Meier was also becoming involved as he wrestled with what Scripture said on these issues. The members of the mission team struggled with the distinction between a “pious opinion” and a public teaching. They felt that if they were allowed to believe and hold to position 3, that extraordinary gifts probably do occur in our time although Scripture does not speak conclusively, it was not proper to be restricted from teaching this position. This led to another meeting between the missionary team and synod officials. This time the meeting was help in Taiwan.

At this meeting on August 26, 2007, much that had been said previously was discussed including the different positions relating to spiritual gifts. The missionaries stated they recognized the concerns of the SEA EC including the false teachings that exist in many groups that are charismatic and that extraordinary spiritual gifts can lead away from focus on the Word. Meier and Siirila expressed their belief that these dangers were being guarded against and that the Word was still primary among the Taiwan Team.³⁰ Jones expressed a frustration that “95% of his ministry focuses on the Word, namely, law and gospel, because without this sanctification cannot come forth [sic].”³¹ Jones later writes of himself:

²⁸ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 13.

²⁹ Minutes of “Special” Meetings with Taiwan Mission Team at Wisconsin Lutheran College, July 13-14, 1993, 11.

³⁰ SEAEC Minutes—August-September, 1994, 19-20.

³¹ SEAEC Minutes—August-September, 1994, 20.

For more than 10 years he labored to share the Gospel, as he knew it. But the results were very disappointing. Perhaps two or three people a year joined the small fellowship, and a lot of them were coming from other churches. What do you do when everything you have been taught in seminary, read in countless books and heard from many speakers at conferences about evangelism doesn't work?³²

The meeting reached the following conclusion: The Taiwan Team may hold to position 3, because Scripture does not forbid or disallow it. However, since it lacks scriptural affirmation they should not teach that position. Since they represent a church body that by consensus and tradition teaches position 2, namely, that while Scripture does not say extraordinary spiritual gifts have necessarily cease, believers are not instructed to expect or look for them, they are therefore to teach this position. If they are unable to do this in good conscience, they will need to defend their position in writing on the basis of Scripture. If they desired that the WELS reexamine its public teaching of on the issue of spiritual gifts, they should do so through the Conference of Presidents (COP). They are expressly asked to teach position 2 publicly.³³

Missionary Jones expressed discomfort with this at the meeting. He felt very strongly that spiritual gifts are still being given to the church and struggled with not teaching this. He asked the committee for 30 days to formulate an answer for them.³⁴ On September 23, 1994 he resign his office as missionary to Taiwan and pastor in the CLEC and his membership in the WELS. He said:

It is my opinion that they ["supernatural" gifts] are continuing and we are seeing evidence of them in our ministry in Taiwan. To be required to teach and practice a contrary position or opinion mitigates against my conscience and understanding of Scriptures on this matter. Furthermore, to be bound by "consensus and tradition" rather than clear Scripture, is not a position I can personally defend.³⁵

³² Ralph Jones, "Personal Testimony and Details of What We Believe," available on the web at <http://www.achristiansbest.com/about/about.htm>.

³³ SEAEC Minutes—August-September, 1994, 22

³⁴ SEAEC Minutes—August-September, 1994, 20

³⁵ Correspondence—Letter from Ralph Jones to Executive Committee for Southeast Asian Missions, September 23, 1994.

While Jones was the only missionary to resign at that time, the rest of the team also struggled with this issue. On September 20, 1994, Meier appealed the restriction against teaching position 3. In his letter to the COP he indicated his belief that this restriction “is not truly based on Scripture.”³⁶ In the paper attached to this letter he stated his belief that “it is scriptural to teach that the Holy Spirit still has and still exercises the power to give His gifts when and where He chooses.”³⁷ He also said, “I have been told that although Scripture does not preclude the presence of what are sometimes called “charismatic gifts” (e.g., tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.) in today’s church, I am not allowed to encourage other people to believe in them or desire them.”³⁸ He had been told the reason for this is because such teaching would be “1) UNNECESSARY; 2) potentially (if not actually) DANGEROUS; 3) potentially (if not actually) DIVISIVE.”³⁹ He agreed that if this were true such a teaching should be avoided, be his contention was that these were false conclusions.

For the next months what the missionaries continued to struggle with the restriction not to publicly teach their position. Ultimately they determined that they could not satisfy both the obligations that had to their Synod and to their own consciences.⁴⁰ The only honest opinion was for them to remove themselves from a church body whose teachings were no longer their own. On February 13, 1995 Timothy Meier and David Kriehn separately tendered their resignations from their positions and the WELS. Leann Eyerman also resigned as a lay worker with the synod. All told the issue of extraordinary gifts led three missionaries and one lay worker to

³⁶ Correspondence—Letter from Timothy Meier to WELS Conference of Presidents, September 20, 1994, 1.

³⁷ Correspondence—Letter from Timothy Meier to WELS Conference of Presidents, September 20, 1994, 2.

³⁸ Correspondence—Letter from Timothy Meier to WELS Conference of Presidents, September 20, 1994, 2.

³⁹ Correspondence—Letter from Timothy Meier to WELS Conference of Presidents, September 20, 1994, 2.

⁴⁰ Correspondence—Letter from Timothy Meier to Executive Committee for Southeast Asia Missions, February 13, 1995.

break fellowship with the WELS. Rob Siirila remained with WELS in the Taiwan field as did Kevin Stellick who had arrived a brief time prior.

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