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By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

A growing number of Baptists may have brought in the New Year by raising a glass of something a bit stronger than iced tea, some cultural observers speculate. Baptist attitudes toward alcohol consumption seem to be in transition, they insist.

Consider the spirited debate—and debate about spirits—sparked last summer when messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting approved a resolution opposing the consumption of alcoholic beverages—and an amendment disqualifying imbibers from service as trustees of SBC entities.

Messengers passed resolutions on such volatile issues as same-sex marriage, illegal immigration and genocide in Darfur with little discussion,

but the call for total abstinence prompted debate on the convention floor and ongoing dialogue on Internet blogs.

“The Southern Baptist Convention is committed to drawing boundaries. It was inevitable this would be one of them,” said Bill Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest Divinity School. “Each year, Southern Baptists try to find ways to set themselves off as different than the prevailing culture. But this time, they discovered that even inerrantists may take a drink every now and then.”

Indeed, some self-described inerrantists and Calvinists kept the issue alive long after the annual meeting, arguing on Internet chat rooms that the Bible condemns drunkenness but does not present a compelling case for total abstinence.

Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla., recently wrote on his blog a satirical list of 10 reasons why tea and coffee drinkers should be excluded from Southern Baptist leadership and missions service.

Burleson—whose earlier blog postings nearly led to his removal as an International Mission Board trustee—poked fun at many of the arguments traditionally used to promote total abstinence from alcohol by applying them to the use of tea and coffee.

“Drinking tea leads a person to addition to caffeine,” he wrote. “There might be some who allege that drinking just one or two glasses of tea does not lead to caffeine addiction. This is technically true, but unfortunately, not all Christians who partake in moderate tea drinking can stop with just a couple of glasses.

“It is not uncommon for Christian men and women to progress from tea, to coffee, to 64-ounce colas or Mountain Dews. Where does it stop? How does one know when the line of addiction has been crossed? If caffeine is addictive, then why play with fire?”

Preaching total abstinence

Burleson's satire is a far cry from the position fundamentalist icon W.A. Criswell took. In a 1968 sermon he preached at First Baptist Church in Dallas, Criswell pointed to the Old Testament prophet Daniel as an example for Christians because Daniel "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself" by drinking the king's wine.

"We're not talking about moderation. That's not in the book, and I preach what's in the book," Criswell said. "We're talking about abstinence—total abstinence."

Criswell countered the argument that Jesus turned the water into wine at a wedding in Cana by insisting Christ made a divinely different drink.

"It was the celestial drink that we shall share together when we sit down to the table of the Lord at the marriage supper of the Lamb, some glorious and final day," Criswell said. "Do you think that God made in that cup what it is that makes men stagger, that makes men beasts, that makes men drunk? It is unthinkable. It is unimaginable."

Today, some Baptists insist modern-day problems associated with alcohol abuse present a compelling argument for abstinence, but few appeal to Scripture for an absolute prohibition—or argue that Jesus made unfermented grape juice at the wedding in Cana.

"The Bible does not put forward just an abstinence perspective. John the Baptist apparently took a Nazarite vow of abstinence. But Jesus made wine," said Bill Tillman, T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology.

Tillman insists Baptist attitudes toward beverage alcohol have been influenced both by culture surrounding the church and by a culture that developed within many churches.

“It’s more of a church culture that has been imposed than one operating out of seeking and asking, ‘What would the gospel have us do?’ The church culture tends toward more of a law-and-order approach,” he said.

Baptists who have taken Scripture seriously have differed over how Christians should balance their freedom from the law that grows out of God’s grace and their need to give up some privileges for the sake of other people, Tillman noted.

“For many, the guide has been: If it’s a hindrance to your Christian witness, stop it,” he observed.

An honest appraisal of Baptist attitudes toward alcohol consumption also must acknowledge a fair measure of hypocrisy, he acknowledged.

“There’s long been a pattern running through our history of Baptists publicly forbidding the consumption of alcohol but privately consuming it. There’s a lot of duplicity that has gone on,” Tillman said.

History shows mixed attitudes

Baptist attitudes always been “mixed on drinks,” said church historian Leonard of Wake Forest.

“We’ve always had some who have repudiated alcohol,” he said. However, many early Baptists in the United States drank moderate amounts of beer, wine and even hard liquor.

Elijah Craig, a Kentucky Baptist minister who founded both the Baptist-related Georgetown College and a distillery, generally has been credited as the inventor of bourbon whiskey, Leonard noted.

As Baptists—along with Methodists and other revivalist Protestant groups—moved to the American frontier, they saw breakup of families and

the general lawlessness that accompanied easy access to open saloons.

Consequently, the conservative revivalists joined forces with social gospel liberals in launching a temperance movement that ultimately developed into an abstinence movement, Leonard observed.

“In revivals, preachers invited sinners to accept Jesus and at the same time sign a pledge not to drink alcohol,” he said. “It was a truly ecumenical movement. The social gospel people saw what alcohol abuse did to the poor, and they viewed it as the root of much urban social evil. The personal salvation people saw it as detrimental to the individual Christian’s body, and they believed the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.”

It also became a way for Protestants to set themselves off as different from—and in their minds, morally superior to—immigrant Catholics who drank socially, he added.

Baptist enthusiasm for the anti-liquor crusade in the late 19th and 20th centuries was fueled by genuine concern over the damaged lives, fractured families and financial heartache associated with alcohol abuse—as well as a tendency among some believers to equate Christianity with a set of prohibitions, Tillman added.

“It appealed to those who essentially practiced Christianity out of a ‘thou-shalt-not’ perspective,” he said.

That viewpoint influenced the way they read and interpreted Scripture, he added, noting, “You see what you want to see.”

Wine or grape juice?

It led to debates over whether the drink at Christ’s Last Supper was fermented or not—and whether churches observing the memorial meal should use wine or grape juice.

Herschel Hobbs, the renowned pastor-theologian who chaired the committee that drafted the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message, maintained the cup taken at Christ's Last Supper and instituted as one of the elements of the Lord's Supper was filled with grape juice, not wine.

"Some interpret 'fruit of the vine' as wine. However, as the bread was unleavened, free of bacteria, was the cup also not grape juice?" he asked in his church study course book he wrote to explain the Baptist Faith & Message.

"Wine is the product of the juice plus fermentation caused by bacteria. Since both elements represented the pure body and blood of Jesus, there is reason to ponder. The writer sees 'fruit of the vine' as pure grape juice untainted by fermentation."

But until Thomas Welch—a Methodist minister-turned-dentist and leader in the temperance movement—developed the pasteurization process for nonfermenting grape juice, Baptist churches consistently used wine in communion, Leonard said.

"I've always found it ironic that Baptists have insisted on a literalist approach to Scripture when it comes to baptism by immersion, but when the temperance movement came along, they fell off the wagon and gave up wine in communion at the drop of a hat," he noted.

However, he noted, a few churches "argued as biblical literalists that they couldn't give up wine in favor of the grape juice that the liberals used." Some backcountry churches in the Southeast have continued to make elderberry wine in their basements for the Lord's Supper, he added.

Divided by geography

Baptist attitudes toward beverage alcohol also have been influenced by

geography, Leonard noted. West of Mississippi and in the Deep South, abstinence has been strong, but churches on the East Coast—particularly in Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina—generally have been more accepting of social drinking.

Robert Prince has seen “definite regional differences” on alcohol consumption firsthand. Next month, Prince will mark his fourth anniversary as pastor of First Baptist Church in Waynesville, N.C. Before that, he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Vernon in North Texas.

“Probably 80 percent of the church in Vernon would have been against the use of alcohol. At our church here in Waynesville, it’s probably more like 40 percent,” he said.

Ironically, Prince sees little difference between incidents of problem drinking and the social problems associated with alcohol abuse in the two communities.

“It’s a real problem both places,” he said.

In addition to geography, Prince believes generational differences also account for varying attitudes among Baptists toward beverage alcohol.

“Among the 35-and-younger crowd, they seem more open about alcohol—even conservative evangelicals,” he said.

Ken Huggins, pastor of Elkins Lake Baptist Church in Huntsville, agreed many younger Baptists seem less adamant in opposition to alcohol consumption.

“Most of the hard-core reaction against it is from the older generation,” he said.

But the younger generation may be influenced less by Baptist tradition and more by non-Baptist evangelicals who write and talk freely about meeting

friends in bars or drinking wine at meals, he observed.

“A lot of them come from non-Baptist backgrounds, and there is a lot of cross-pollination” with other traditions, he noted.

And as they move upward socio-economically, social drinking also loses much of its stigma, he added.

Words of caution

Both Huggins and Prince agreed a less hard-line approach toward alcohol consumption seems to reflect a more honest approach to Scripture, but both quickly added the Bible clearly condemns drunkenness.

“We should quit overselling it and quit over-stating the case. We should quit making absolutes out of cultural preferences,” Huggins said.

Still, Prince noted, it “could be a double-edged sword” if some people interpret a less-than-absolute position against alcohol as an excuse to indulge.

Bobby Broyles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Ballinger, fears that’s exactly how many young people interpret their parents’ permissive attitudes toward alcohol—and their apathetic attitude toward underage drinking.

“It’s a pervasive problem, but too many people don’t think it’s a problem,” he said, noting underage drinking may be even worse in fairly isolated rural communities than in metropolitan areas usually associated with substance abuse.

In fact, he noted, the problem has become so significant in Ballinger the school district is considering a range of responses, including possible mandatory drug tests.

If that happens, the school district first will have to schedule a series of public hearings on the issue. Broyles sees that as an opportunity for First Baptist Church members to educate their neighbors about the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

“We have about 400 family units in our junior high and high school. What if we trained 40 people or 40 couples about drugs and alcohol, and then we went them into the community to make 400 home visits?” he asked. “We could invite people to the public hearings, and use it as an occasion to talk with them about the problem.”

Knowing how to take a firm stand against something destructive without making it into “forbidden fruit” that seems irresistibly attractive can be challenging, Broyles noted. Even so, he hopes Baptists don’t water down their views on alcohol consumption too much.

“I’d hate to think we’re softening our stand on this issue when it’s causing such untold problems in families—when it’s at the root of so much physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse,” he said.