Baptists debate social drinking

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CARROLLTON, Ga. (ABP) — Two decades after settling the question of biblical inerrancy, Southern Baptists are battling about booze.

Seeking to remain relevant in today's culture, many Baptists have abandoned former taboos against social activities like dancing and going to movies. Now some are questioning the denomination's historic position of abstaining from alcohol, prompting others to draw a line.

"Alcohol Today" is published by Hannibal Books.

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina recently passed a motion to "study a policy of the social use of alcohol" related to funding of church plants, employment of personnel and nomination of persons to committees and boards of trustees.

"We as Southern Baptists in the North Carolina Baptist State Convention want the world to know that we promote the King of Kings, not the King of Beers," Tim Rogers, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Indian Trail, N.C., told fellow messengers at the Nov. 8-10 annual meeting in Greensboro.

That is the same city where the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution in 2006 expressing "total opposition" to alcoholic beverages and urging that no one who uses them be elected to a position of leadership in the denomination.

It was hardly groundbreaking — the convention has spoken against drinking more than 50 times dating back to 1886. What made it news,

however, was a number of well-known conservatives who rose to speak against a statement calling for total abstinence.

The ruckus — and the post-convention blogs that kept the argument alive — prompted Peter Lumpkins, a Southern Baptist pastor for more than 20 years before turning to a writing ministry, to pen his first book: *Alcohol Today: Abstinence in an Age of Indulgence*, in 2009.

"One would be hard-pressed to locate a belief — outside believers' baptism by immersion itself — which reflects more unity among Southern Baptists than abstinence from intoxicating beverages for pleasurable purposes," Lumpkins said in an e-mail interview.

Lumpkins, who blogs at *SBC Tomorrow*, said younger Southern Baptist leaders do not appreciate that history and instead view teetotalism as extra-biblical and nothing more than "Pharisaical legalism."

Lumpkins is among Southern Baptists who view relaxed attitudes about social drinking as the biggest controversy facing the Southern Baptist Convention since the "conservative resurgence" debate over Scripture in the 1980s.

He writes in the book: "Make no mistake: the popular, trendy appeal for Bible studies in bars; pastors leading men's groups at cigar shops to puff, preach and partake; conference speakers who openly drink alcohol nevertheless are invited to college campuses as they carve out yet more influence into the youngest generation of Southern Baptists — all this makes an impending moral crisis among Southern Baptists predictably certain."

Lumpkins describes "a cataclysmic moral shift away from biblical holiness expressed in biblical Lordship toward the relativistic, postmodern norms of American pop culture, including its hedonistic obsession with fulfilling desires."

Unless the "Christian hedonism" trend is halted, Lumpkins fears "the largest Protestant voice for abstinence soon will succumb to the ominous lure of an age of indulgence. We will forfeit our biblical heritage to the whims of an obsessive pop morality that wildly sniffs the wind but for the faintest scent of pleasure fulfilled."

Lumpkins, a binge drinker in his youth, says the church has "conceded its historic role as the moral conscience of our culture, particularly as it forfeited its once-strong position on abstinence from intoxicating beverages for pleasurable purposes."

Without the abstinence standard, he argues the church either consciously or unconsciously helps promote a message in the larger culture that drinking is "cool."

In the book Lumpkins debunks a "common but untrue myth" that the Temperance movement leading to Prohibition was composed mainly of backwoods fundamentalists and uneducated moral legalists. To the contrary, he says the abstinence-only movement was led by the brightest theologians, Bible scholars, university presidents and medical professionals of the day.

He also lays out a biblical case for abstinence. While there are verses that seem to praise wine, he says, there are others that condemn wine, a point overlooked by those who argue the Bible only condemns drunkenness and not drinking.

His final hurdle is the story in the Gospel of John about the wedding feast in Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. Lumpkins says the Greek and Hebrew words translated "wine" don't distinguish between fresh and fermented grape juice, and he doubts the Son of God would "manifest forth his glory" by sprucing up a party that had run out of alcohol.

Lumpkins also critiques Baptists who abstain from drink for different

reasons. He suspects most Southern Baptists hold a view similar to those expressed by Richard Land and Barrett Duke of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission that drinking is an "unwise" practice best to be avoided. Lumpkins says the question isn't whether drinking is wise but if it is moral.

"The way I've come to see it, forfeiting moral scruples toward the consumption of alcoholic beverages for pleasurable purposes forfeits the only biblical model we possess to biblically gauge moral scruples toward all other intoxicating substances for pleasurable purposes," he said in his e-mail.

"In other words, if the moral case is correct that consuming intoxicating beverages for pleasurable purposes remains ethically acceptable (if consumed in moderation), then it morally follows that consuming any other intoxicating substance is also ethically acceptable (if consumed in moderation). At least theoretically, the moral case is made for drug legalization. I realize this sounds radical. Yet, from the way I see the issue argued from the moderationist perspective (especially young Baptists), I can come to no other conclusion."

What about missionaries serving in countries that have no moral scruples against drinking faced with the prospect of offending a host offering them a glass of wine? Lumpkins called that a case of "conflicting absolutes" in a fallen world that qualified missionaries must figure out for themselves. On the other hand, he said the last person one would want to appoint to such a mission field is someone before qualifying who would answer "yes" to the question "do you believe in or practice social drinking?"

–Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.