Baptist history on alcohol: not totally teetotaling

GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) – Question: Why do you always take two Baptists with you when you go fishing?

Answer: Because if you only bring one, he'll drink all your beer.

Most everybody who grew up in the South has a favorite Baptists-and-alcohol joke, usually deriving its punchline from the hypocrisy of a denomination whose members publicly oppose alcohol consumption but privately indulge.

Those jokes could have come to mind for many observers of the Southern Baptist Convention's recent annual meeting, held June 13-14. Although several controversial business items arose from the convention's floor, the one that stirred the lengthiest debate was a resolution condemning alcohol consumption.

Although it passed by a wide margin, several messengers spoke strongly against it — providing the rare specter of conservative Baptists publicly disagreeing with each other over the propriety of alcohol consumption. One member of the convention's Resolutions Committee, arguing in favor of the measure, declared that Southern Baptists “have always stood for total abstinence” from beverage alcohol.

But Baptist history — including the fact that a well-known Baptist minister was the inventor of bourbon whiskey — casts some doubt on that statement's veracity.

“It's not true,” said Baptist historian Bill Leonard. “The temperance movement was late but very thorough among Baptists in the South and other Protestants as well. Early on, many Baptists used spirits; some even brewed beer.” Leonard has
studied the history of the temperance and Prohibition movements that sought to curb or ban alcohol consumption in 19th- and early 20th-century America.

Leonard, dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, pointed to Elijah Craig as an example. The minister, entrepreneur and founder of the Baptist-related Georgetown College in Kentucky is widely credited with creating the official spirit of the Bluegrass State around 1789. Today, Kentucky's Heaven Hill Distillery sells a high-end single-barrel bourbon named after Craig.

Leonard also said many Baptist churches served real wine when observing the Lord's Supper late into the 19th century. “I know for a fact that First Baptist Church [of] Savannah, Ga., in particular, used wine for communion until” the 18th Amendment, which instituted Prohibition nationwide, went into effect in 1920, he said.

Leonard said that Baptists, Methodists and other revivalist Protestant sects were most common on the American frontier — away from the established Episcopal and Congregational churches of the East Coast urban areas. This tendency persisted beyond the Civil War and well into the Victorian era.

“On the American frontier…liquor was a very common social beverage,” Leonard said.

The harsh conditions, poor water quality and frequency of disease common to pioneer life led to frequent alcohol use for both recreational and medicinal purposes. In many frontier towns, the first non-governmental public institutions established were frequently churches and taverns.

The very prevalence of liquor on the frontier, though, is part of what gave rise to the temperance movement.

“By the 1830s and beyond, Baptists, Methodists and
Presbyterians particularly were very concerned by the social problems caused by alcohol abuse,” Leonard said.

Those included family strife, spousal abuse and frontier lawlessness exacerbated by rowdy bar patrons and alcoholics desperate to get enough money for another drink.

As a result, concerned frontier Protestants began joining hands with more theologically progressive urbanites in the mid-19th century to give the temperance movement significant power.

“The temperance movement was particularly interesting because it brings together both theological conservatives and liberals,” Leonard said. “Many of the social gospel people were part of the temperance movement because they saw what alcohol abuse did to the poor” in urban areas.

Meanwhile, he continued, “The conservatives began to say: One, it's a social problem; it's causing family abuse; and two, the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and it needs to be treated accordingly. They skip over Paul's words to Timothy about 'taking a little wine for your stomach's sake.'”

Leonard referred to I Timothy 5:23, where the apostle Paul advised his spiritual protégé to drink wine medicinally for a chronic stomach ailment and to prevent other illnesses.

Whether there is any biblical warrant for Baptists' persistent teetotaling tendencies took center stage in the Southern Baptists' debate over the resolution. The resolution itself cites scant doctrinal or scriptural justification for total alcohol abstinence.

“Whereas, years of research confirm biblical warnings that alcohol use leads to physical, mental and emotional damage (e.g., Proverbs 23:29-35),” the resolution begins, quoting an Old Testament passage that warns about the dangers of drunkenness. The resolution also says that “some religious
leaders...are now advocating the consumption of alcoholic beverages based on a misinterpretation of the doctrine of 'our freedom in Christ.'"

The statement did not refer to some biblical passages where alcoholic beverages were treated positively: Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding feast and the wine Jesus and the disciples drank at the Last Supper.

That is the problem with a denomination that claims to believe in the perfect nature of the Bible, according to one of its opponents. Benjamin Cole, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, labeled the convention's debate over the statement "a case study in absurdity" on his blog just days after speaking out against the resolution on the convention floor.

“What frustrated me is not that the resolution mischaracterized the position of those who acknowledge the whole counsel of God in formulating their position on alcohol,” he wrote. “Neither was I upset that the convention messengers, having just elected [new SBC President] Frank Page on a platform of ending the [denomination's] narrowing trends, chose to adopt a very narrow and poorly worded resolution. What angered me was that a reasonable discussion about the nature and extent of Christian liberty in the gospel seems impossible among brethren who affirm the inerrancy of biblical authority.”

But one prominent SBC leader said Cole's criticism was off-base.

“As noted in the debate on the resolution, it's clear from Scripture that wine was consumed during biblical times — and that it is even encouraged in moderation in select passages of the Bible,” wrote James Smith, editor of the conservative Florida Baptist Witness newspaper, in a June 19 editorial on the convention. “But the idea that adopting a resolution which
calls for total abstinence of alcohol is anti-biblical fails to take in account the full biblical witness — as well as the pernicious influence alcohol has had in our society and in the lives of countless individuals.”

Smith went on to quote an anti-alcohol tract from the SBC's ethics agency that cites Bible passages encouraging Christians, through the daily examples they set, not to cause others to “stumble” morally.

Most of the resolution, Smith noted, denounces the negative social effects of alcohol abuse, including domestic strife and drunk driving accidents.

But, other SBC supporters have countered, that argument doesn't necessitate absolute abstinence from beverage alcohol.

“[T]he sin of drunkenness is similar to the sin of promiscuous sex. We don't teach that a man should abstain from sex with his wife because other people are sex addicts,” wrote Wade Burleson, a conservative Oklahoma pastor who has gained notoriety in recent months for criticizing some SBC policies and leaders on his blog. “Similarly, we don't teach that individuals MUST abstain from alcohol because some commit the sin of drunkenness.”

He continued: “The pastor's job is not to force those who use sex properly, or alcohol properly, to abstain from either because some others cannot control the lusts of their wicked hearts, but rather, the pastor's job is to teach the Bible and urge God's people to live by biblical principles.”

He then related a story from his ministry involving a man who had recently accepted Christ and joined his church. Burleson said he was able to overcome suspicions from the man's estranged wife about Baptist ministers when, upon an invitation for a gourmet meal at her home, Burleson asked why she had not chosen a bottle of wine from her extensive collection to serve with dinner.
“To make a long story short, the walls that had hindered the relationship came down,” he wrote, noting that the woman eventually accepted Christ, reconciled with her husband and joined his church. “Now, I ask this simple question to my Southern Baptist friends. ‘What, if anything, is wrong with the events just described to you?’”

One response that typified most of the 100-plus comments posted in response to that entry on Burleson's blog read, “I'm glad to see Wade stand up for what Scripture requires from us, rather than the twisted imposition of culture upon Scripture that the total abstinence position represents.”

Such attitudes among theologically fundamentalist Baptists are interesting to Leonard, the Wake Forest historian — but not necessarily surprising, due to socio-economic changes among Southern Baptists.

Methodists and Presbyterians eventually drifted away from devotion to the temperance movement as larger and larger percentages of their members became urbanized and upwardly mobile, he said. While most Baptists have clung more tenaciously to abstinence, the average Southern Baptist has, in the years since World War II, become much wealthier and better educated than were her Baptist forebears.

“Now, this says something about the changing mores of conservative Baptists, many of whom are in churches where there is a good bit of social mobility, who are in churches were wine...may be served socially” among faithful members, Leonard said.

He also said many modern Southern Baptists have traveled to other nations where alcohol consumption is not an issue among Baptists. They also have become more familiar with the broader evangelical world in the United States, including conservative evangelicals from Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other traditions that have few or no qualms about alcohol use.
“Even conservative Baptists have fallen off the wagon,” he said.

Perhaps, then, Baptist punchlines will eventually lose their punch.

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