



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 34: The Word of Wisdom



Faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adhere to a code of health known as the Word of Wisdom. Observance of this law of health brings both physical and spiritual blessings. The Lord gave a revelation to the prophet Joseph Smith on February 27, 1833, that states, in part:

"Thus saith the Lord unto you: In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation -- That inasmuch as any man drinketh wine or strong drink among you, behold it is not good, neither meet in the sight of your Father, only in assembling yourselves together to offer up your sacraments before him ... And, again, strong drinks are not for the belly, but for the washing of your bodies. And again, tobacco is not for the body, neither for the belly, and is not good for man, but is an herb for bruises and all sick cattle, to be used with judgment and skill. And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly ... And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones; And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures; And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint. And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them. Amen."^[1]

The Word of Wisdom also gives valuable instructions for healthy living, including the regular consumption of grain as the "staff of life," herbs, and fruits, and a caution to use meat sparingly. The Word of Wisdom gave warning about the danger of tobacco, alcohol, and hot drinks long before the danger of these habit-forming substances had been fully recognized by medical science. The counsel and promises of the Word of Wisdom have been richly vindicated with time.

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Tobacco

Tobacco use is the main cause of lung cancer, the leading cause of cancer death in the US and many other nations, and obstructive lung disease. The American Cancer Society reports that at least 43 cancer-causing substances have been identified in tobacco smoke. Smoking is also a major contributor to cardiovascular disease and increases the risk of strokes and heart attacks. Many diseases have been associated with tobacco use, including cancer of the head and neck, pancreas, kidney, bladder, coronary artery disease, peripheral vascular disease, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and peptic ulcers. Tobacco alters normal physiology and contributes to poor tissue and bone healing. A comprehensive list of all maladies linked to tobacco by medical research would run in the hundreds, and there is no organ system which tobacco does not adversely effect in some way.

Medical research calculates that approximately eleven minutes of life are lost for each cigarette smoked, and that smokers lose an average of 6.5-14 years of life expectancy compared to non-smokers.^{[2],[3]} Studies have found that the average smoker in North America and the United Kingdom consume over 300,000 cigarettes in a lifetime, leading to an average of 3.4 million minutes of lost life per smoker. One can only imagine what societal good could be accomplished if this time were spent on

service to others rather than being lost to harmful habits.

Alcohol

While the dangers of drunkenness have long been recognized, large-scale industrial distillation of alcohol today results in wider availability of concentrated alcoholic beverages than ever before. Heavy alcohol accelerates heart disease, may result in liver cirrhosis, and can lead to cancer of the throat, mouth, esophagus, stomach, and liver. Alcohol use can cause memory loss, loss of coordination, and emotional disturbances, and other problems. Any amount of alcohol use damages brain cells, and even mild alcohol users may experience some disturbance of cognitive function.^[4] Alcohol is involved in 40-50% of all fatal motor vehicle accidents in the US, 50% of homicides, 20% of suicides, 40% of falls, and one-third of child abuse cases.^[5] In Eastern Europe and Russia, alcohol consumption is a prominent factor in many drownings, accidents, and deaths from alcohol toxicity. Alcohol abuse is also associated with increased rates of domestic violence and the disruption of family life worldwide.

Recent research demonstrates that the impairment of perception and judgment by alcohol lasts much longer than most are aware.^[6] Researcher Robert Pihl states: "People who think they've waited their two hours before driving home may need to actually wait six hours ... The drinker in the process of re-attaining sobriety is likely to be more dangerous, for example, than the drinker who is still imbibing."

Some medical research has claimed that consumption of small amounts of red wine may have a protective effect against heart disease. More recent research demonstrates that it is flavonoids from grapes, rather than the alcohol, which leads to the health benefits.^[7] Those who drink dark grape juice have the same heart benefits seen in those who drink small amounts of red wine, but without the negative health effects alcohol. Flavonoid compounds that protect the heart occur in high concentrations in the juice and peel of most citrus fruits, and are also found in onions, broccoli, grains, greens, and soy products. Eating healthy foods as counseled in the Word of Wisdom is a much better choice than drinking alcoholic beverages for alleged health claims. LDS Apostle Ezra Taft Benson taught: "We encourage earthly knowledge in many areas, but remember, if there is ever a conflict between earthly knowledge and the words of the prophet, you stand with the prophet, and you'll be blessed and time will vindicate you."^[8]

Hot Drinks

The Word of Wisdom warns against hot drinks, interpreted as meaning tea and coffee. During roasting, the composition of the coffee bean is dramatically altered, and over 700 "volatile substances ... are formed."^[9] Compounds linked to cancer and heart disease are present in addition to central nervous system stimulants.^[10] Harmful chemicals including acetaldehyde, ammonia, carbon disulphide, acetic acid, nitrosamines, and others are present in brewed coffee.^[11] One study by Swiss researchers reported that chlorogenic acid, which is present in coffee, destroys much of the body's thiamine when one quart of coffee was consumed in three hours.^[12]

Studies report that consumption of a daily cup of coffee -- whether decaffeinated or not -- increases the risk of bladder cancer by a factor of three.^{[13],[14]} while another study found that drinking over two cups of caffeinated coffee a day doubles the risk of fatal bladder cancer.^[15] A metaanalysis in the International Journal of Cancer of five studies with nearly three thousand participants found that the consumption of very hot beverages appears to increase the risk of esophageal cancer by as much as four times.^[16] Brown drink users have an increased risk of stomach, kidney, lung, pancreatic, ovarian and colon cancer;^{[17],[18]} these findings may explain in part the high rates of stomach and esophageal cancer in nations like Japan and Iran where hot drinks constitute the principal beverage. Some studies have linked the consumption of various teas to esophageal cancer, tooth decay, and other ailments.^{[19],[20]}

Although caffeine is not formally prohibited by the Word of Wisdom Latter-day Saints have also been warned against caffeinated drinks.^{[21],[22],[23]} Consumption of large amounts of caffeine can cause anxiety, palpitations, irritability, difficulty sleeping, and stomach complaints. Why, then, have Latter-day Saints not been warned to avoid chocolate, which contains small amounts of caffeine? LDS Author Cooper Johnson writes: "According to one study, the average American consumes 280 mg of caffeine per day, which is a harmful level according to the same study). This is the equivalent to 2-3 cups of coffee per day." He notes that an individual who abstains from coffee and tea "would have to consume 7 or 8 cans of cola to reach this level ... or 18 Cadbury chocolate bars ... or 56 cups of hot chocolate (which equates to about 3 buckets full) per day ... or some combination of the above. The point is clear ... moderation and avoiding unhealthy substances and/or unhealthy levels of other substances."^[24]

Addiction

All of the substances forbidden by the Word of Wisdom have addictive properties. When we consume addictive substances, we develop dependencies that can shackle our physical and spiritual freedom. These substances can also impair our ability to feel and respond to the Holy Spirit.

Modern medical research has demonstrated the highly addictive nature of tobacco. According to one survey, over 80% of adult smokers in the United States had tried smoking before turning 18, and more than half had become regular smokers by that age.^[25] Although only 5% of daily smokers in high school stated they would definitely be smoking five years later, 70% stated that they regret beginning to smoke and two-thirds state that they want to quit, almost 75% were still smoking seven to nine years later. Seventeen million people in the US report trying to quit smoking every year, yet only one in ten succeeds.

In 1833, the Lord "warned ... and forewarned" us "in consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days." Today, this is a more appropriate description than ever of industries that inflict suffering and loss upon mankind in order to earn a profit. LDS author Lance Star wrote: "One need not look very far in modern times to discern some of the evil designs that men have conspired to perpetrate in regards to the health of man."^[26] He continued: "For example, on March 18, 1996 a former Philip Morris scientist told federal regulators that the company controlled nicotine levels in cigarettes to assure continued sales. Tobacco makers were "spiking" their products with increased doses of nicotine in order to ensure addiction and thus assure continued consumption of what was known to be a dangerous product. These 'conspiring men' conspired to market these dangerous and addictive products to children."^[27] At the same time, tobacco company executives testified before the US Congress that they were not aware that nicotine was addictive.

In the United States, tobacco company revenues exceed \$32 billion per year. The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, a

publication of the Centers for Disease Control, noted: "In 1999, smoking caused approximately 440,000 premature deaths in the United States annually and approximately \$157 billion in annual health-related economic losses."[\[28\]](#) The report further observed: "For each of the approximately 22 billion packs sold in the US in 1999, \$3.45 was spent on medical care attributable to smoking, and \$3.73 in productivity losses were incurred, for a total cost of \$7.18 per pack." During this same period, the average cost of a pack of cigarettes in the US was \$2.92. The medical and social cost of tobacco is thus several times the total revenue of tobacco companies, with the majority of the economic burden being carried by non-smokers.

Regular alcohol users also develop a physical dependency, and precipitous cessation of heavy alcohol consumption produces a withdrawal syndrome that can be fatal. Caffeine is an addictive stimulant. "Caffeinism" is a drug addiction, and caffeine withdrawal syndrome is a known psychiatric condition. In spite of soft drink industry claims that caffeine "enhances flavor," one study found that only 8% of adults were able to taste a difference between caffeinated and non-caffeinated sodas.[\[29\]](#) Researchers concluded that "high consumption of caffeinated soft drinks more likely reflects caffeine's addictive properties, not its flavor-enhancing qualities. Researcher Roland Griffith observed: "We know adults and children can become physiologically and psychologically dependent on caffeinated soft drinks, experiencing a withdrawal syndrome if they stop."

Inspiration of the Word of Wisdom

Some critics claim that the Word of Wisdom was influenced by temperance movements of the early nineteenth century. Author Lance Starr writes: "other health reform campaigns of Joseph's day did recommend abstinence from tobacco, coffee and tea, but some of these same health reformers also recommended abstinence from pepper, mustard,[\[30\]](#) white bread, salt, ultimately all condiments, and even sex.[\[31\],\[32\]](#) Many members of the medical community in that day also believed in varying degrees of "stimulation associated with such items ... mustard, pepper, and other spices."[\[33\]](#) For much of the nineteenth century, tobacco was widely advertised as promoting digestion and good health. In view of the many false and sensational claims which permeated nineteenth century health movements of all kinds, it is remarkable that Word of Wisdom does not contain any of the quackery of that age. While some individuals held views disapproving of tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful substances, there was no clear medical consensus on the maladies linked to these substances for many decades. Lance Starr notes, "The association of cigarette smoking with lung cancer was documented in the early 1950s, but official consensus statements by scientific bodies accepting this relationship as causal did not occur until the mid-1960s."[\[34\]](#) The allegations of critics that the Word of Wisdom arose from contemporary health movements of the 1830s rather than divine inspiration fail to explain why the Word of Wisdom got virtually everything right and nothing wrong. Even with the benefit of over 170 years of additional medical knowledge, it is difficult to identify any other faith with a code of health as medically and scripturally sound, as relevant, or as beneficial to mind and spirit as the Word of Wisdom.

Practical Outcomes of the Word of Wisdom

Because of the Word of Wisdom, Latter-day Saints have long known that which medical science is just catching up to. Dr. James Enstrom at the University of California Los Angeles School of Medicine reported that active Latter-day Saint men who have never smoked, get moderate exercise, and get adequate sleep have a life expectancy of 85 years, 11 years more than the US average.[\[35\]](#) Their wives have a life expectancy of 88, which is eight years more than the average US woman. Latter-day Saints have less than half of the cancer risk of the population as a whole. The increased life expectancy of Latter-day Saints is even greater than that achieved by the average individual who does not use do not use alcohol or tobacco. Another researcher estimates that those complying with the Word of Wisdom increase their life expectancy by approximately seven years.[\[36\]](#)

A study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation on Utah, which is over 70% LDS, reports: "Its strengths include the lowest prevalence of smoking in the country at 13.2 percent of the population, the lowest risk for heart disease at 19 percent below the national average, the lowest rate of heart disease at 197.9 deaths per 100,000 population and the lowest cancer deaths at 167.8 deaths per 100,000 population. It is also among the top 10 states for low violent crime, strong high school graduation rates, few limited activity days, low total mortality, low infant mortality and a low rate of premature death."[\[37\],\[38\]](#) The President's cancer panel listed Utah as the lowest state for cancer deaths,[\[39\]](#) and Utahns are reported to have the longest life expectancy in the United States.[\[40\]](#)

A World Health Organization study reports that about 40% of all deaths worldwide are due to preventable causes and warns that the "cost of inaction is serious."[\[41\]](#) The report predicts that "unless action is taken, by the year 2020 there will be nine million deaths caused by tobacco, compared to almost five million a year now, five million deaths attributable to overweight and obesity, compared to three million now ... If all of these preventable risks could be addressed as WHO recommends (which WHO acknowledges is a highly ambitious goal), healthy life spans could increase as much as 16 plus years in parts of Africa, where healthy life expectancy now falls as low as just 37 years (in Malawi). Even in the richer developing countries, such as Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, healthy life spans would increase by about five years."[\[42\]](#)

The achievement of such improvements depends more on individual lifestyle choices than on medical care, as even excellent healthcare cannot eliminate the negative consequences of unhealthy lifestyles. Diet and lifestyle are not isolated matters of individual choice or religious teaching, but are matters of social, economic, and governmental concern which impact the present and future of our world. LDS teachings on diet and lifestyle have a great deal to offer the world, and have proved more effective to date at improving the quality and length of life of adherents than any medical technology or government initiative.

Spiritual Benefits of the Dietary Law

In addition to the known -- and yet unknown -- medical reasons, there are also spiritual reasons to observe the principles of the Word of Wisdom. Like the dietary law of the Old Testament, the modern Word of Wisdom has both temporal and spiritual aspects. Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote:

"The Hebrew word for clean used in the dietary law of the Old Testament reached far beyond that of physical cleanliness. Synonyms include pure, unadulterated, uncontaminated, innocent, and holy. A Jewish writer explaining these dietary laws observed: 'A hog could be raised in an incubator on antibiotics, bathed daily, slaughtered in a hospital operating room, and its carcass sterilized by ultra-violet rays, without rendering kosher the pork chops that it yields. 'Unclean' in Leviticus is a ceremonial word. That is why the Torah says of camels and rabbits, 'They are unclean for you,' limiting the definition and the discipline to Israel. Chickens and goats, which we can eat, are scarcely cleaner

by nature than eagles and lions, but the latter are in the class of the unclean."[\[43\]](#),[\[44\]](#)

Along with the health benefits obtained by living the Word of Wisdom, Latter-day Saints enjoy spiritual benefits from living God's law. The Apostle Paul taught, "know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?"[\[45\]](#) He wrote, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."[\[46\]](#) By keeping our bodies free of harmful substances and honoring the principles of the Word of Wisdom, we are better able to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and follow God's will. With greater health and longer lives, Latter-day Saints are also able to render important service to their families and the community.

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[\[3\]](#) Picard, Andre. "Cigarette smokers costly to economy, data show," Globe and Mail, 13 April 2002.

[\[4\]"Moderate alcohol consumption linked to brain shrinkage."](#) Johns Hopkins News Release, 4 December 2003.

[\[5\]Alcohol and Trauma. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism No. 3](#) January 1989.

[\[6\]"Alcohol has lingering effect on brain."](#) BBC News. 14 May 2003. Original article in Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research.

[\[7\]](#) "Benefits of the French Paradox Without The Wine." AlzheimerSupport.com newsletter. January 1, 1999.

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[\[22\]H. Burke Peterson.](#) New Era, Oct. 1975, p. 34.

[\[23\]](#) Widtsoe, John A. The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation, p. 97.

[\[24\]](#) Johnson, Cooper. ["Silly Premises Lead to Silly Conclusions."](#) Foundation for Apologetics Information and Research. 2003.

[\[25\]"Children's Future at Risk from Epidemic of Tobacco Use."](#) US Department of Health and Human Services facts sheet. 23 August 1996.

[\[26\]](#) Starr, Lance. ["Chapter 14: The Word of Wisdom."](#) In Mormonism 201, ed. Allen L. Wyatt. Redding, California: Foundation for Apologetics Information and Research, 2002.

[\[27\]"Secret memos show cigarette-maker targeted teens."](#) Cnn.com. 15 January 1998.

[\[28\]"Annual Smoking-Attributable Mortality, Years of Potential Life Lost, and Economic Costs -- United States, 1995-1999."](#)

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[\[29\]"Study disputes soft drink manufacturers on caffeine."](#) Cnn.com. 14 August 2000.

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[\[44\]](#) Joseph Fielding McConkie, Gospel Symbolism (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 91-92.

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[\[46\]1 Corinthians 3:17](#)