

The Word of Wisdom: A commentary on D&C 89 by Hugh Nibley  
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The Word of Wisdom is so familiar that we can get through this in a hurry, except for a few neglected patches. First, it's a greeting, not by commandment or constraint, but a word of wisdom, the order and will of God for the temporal salvation for all Saints on these last days. These covenants you make are eternal, but you're not going to be worried about tea, coffee and tobacco in the world hereafter. In the ages to come I don't think smoking will be a serious problem with any of us. In fact, it isn't even now. It's a temporal law to serve us during this life, and this is the way it was taken.

The Word of Wisdom doesn't belong to the order of the eternal Gospel. It is temporal and temporary but no less the will of God. We do not covenant and promise to keep the Word of Wisdom, because our promises and covenants are eternal. But we are bound while we're here, so it is not secondary in importance. However, we often make a big fuss about the Word of Wisdom while ignoring the other commandments. President Joseph F Smith used to say that we make the Word of Wisdom a subject of religious hobbyism. "As long as I keep the Word of Wisdom—that's the thing," someone may say, and then preach that and nothing else. That is not the fullness of the Gospel. It is a minimal requirement—a principle with a promise—a first step: No great achievement, but you get a reward for it. Others keep it better than we do. For example, on the whole the Seventh Day Adventists are better keepers of the Word of Wisdom than we are, but it's not the Gospel.

We have been warned and forewarned against the evil designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men. Today this is recognized as the promotion of harmful products. But where do we draw the line of harmful products? And where do we draw the line of harmful products? And where do we strike a balance between harmful products of the money they bring in?

Wine and strong drink are only for the sacrament. Tobacco you may use only for medicine. Discover its use by experimentation. Dr. Marv Roberson, trainer, uses tobacco quite a bit for sprains and bruises quite effectively, but it is to be used with judgment and skill. Skill means experience. (There's your wisdom again.) President Joseph F Smith says the Word of Wisdom means just that – 'wisdom.' You use your wisdom. A commandment, on the other hand, means "You must do this!" A Word of Wisdom you must judge for yourself. Heber C. Kimball included chocolate and cocoa among the hot drinks, but then they drank them extremely hot. When they said hot, they mean hot!

All wholesome herbs. Well, what makes the herb wholesome? For the constitution, use and nature of man. Every herb in the season, every fruit in the season. Joseph Fielding Smith used to say, "Well, we put up our preserves, we freeze our vegetables—when they are ripe." We don't freeze them and use them when they are green. Or when they are rotten. We freeze them in the proper season. They doesn't mean that you're supposed to only eat peas in the three weeks when the peas are perfect for picking. But you can freeze them. You can preserve them in the season, of course. You're still eating them in the season and not taking them prematurely. We get such cranks in this business. Notice: 'With prudence.' There's the answer to the cranks, right there, for prudence means providence, foresight – and thanksgiving.

Eat meat sparingly. Again, sparing is a good word. It means ‘sparing God’s creatures.’ It is to be used with thanksgiving and not with gluttony, which is one of our national weaknesses. (overweight is one of our national diseases.) That’s gluttony, which one of the seven deadly sins. You have a right to meat, according to the 49<sup>th</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants. The family who needs a deer to get through the winter cold or famine. ‘To starve’ means to die of cold means to die of cold as well as of famine. And the Saints need meat to see them through the winter and restore their fainting strength. Remember the miracle of the quails, for example: Game only in times of famine and excess of hunger. But the supplies are limited, and we cannot afford to hunt year round, promiscuously. At the first sight of buffalo in Iowa—the plain was covered with buffalo as far as the eye could see—Brigham young called the brethren together and told them not to shoot one unless they absolutely needed it. And this turned out to be a great blessing for them.

Grain is the staff of life-- the underpinning of the whole cycle. The angiosperms are encapsulated, highly concentrated nourishment supplied from the insects right on up the food chain. (They like to share it with us, too.) It’s not an exclusive diet, though. We lean on it more than anything else, but verses 10 and 11 tell us the importance of herbs, of fruit, and of meat. They are essential, too. All grains, fruits, and berries are good for man. All must be processed in some way, however. The Indians used their berries and acorns a lot, but they had to process or wash them or they would be eating deadly poisons like cyanide and other things. If they didn’t process them, they found out by experience how to treat these things. They used a lot of things that we don’t think are useful at all. It’s amazing Tommy martin has spent his days looking for edible and useful herbs in that lot around his house. He found 128 plants and herbs growing right around his house that people use for some purpose of nutrition, medicine or otherwise. That just shows that they are all around us. But we don’t know anything about it—that’s something that takes a lot of skill.

And then the great promise. It is not included in mortality for man to be immune from suffering but it does guarantee that things will be as they should be. The main thing about the Word of Wisdom is that it represents a new way of life. We don’t realize this, but when we go back to the *Journal of Discourses*: tea, coffee, tobacco and liquor are all a part of our way of life, but they are luxuries, a form of indulgence, a form of gracious living. The Saints need to break away from that. They are things we really don’t need because they are stimulants or narcotics. The early Saints were forced to give them up when they ran out of supplies. The Saints in St. George had no trouble at all with the Word of Wisdom because they couldn’t get at the stuff. They adopted the Word of Wisdom, and it worked. In other words, they were forced into a new way of life.

There’s a new book that’s just come out on alcohol in American history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it seems that Americans imbibed a pint of liquor every day. This was our way of life—perfectly normal. The Word of Wisdom was absolutely necessary to effect a break with these customs, for the coming forth of the kingdom in these days demanded it. Brigham young said the older generation is too far gone. “We must begin with the younger generation. The older ones need it. They collapse without it. They must have their coffee, etc.” Ezra T. Benson said that this was a whole new way of life—a cultural revolution which the Saints have not yet accepted.

Brigham Young again: “when we first heard the revelation many of us thought that it consisted just of our drinking tea and coffee. But it is not just these things but every other evil that is calculated to contaminate this people. We should feel to thank the Lord that we have escaped thus far the contaminating influence of the Gentiles.” George Albert Smith said the same in the conference “The Word of Wisdom sifts the people. They do not realize it, How carefully they are being tested. It’s a gradation, so to speak. It’s a cultural revolution. So also is their treatment of animals, etc.” And the same year (1855) Brigham Young again speaks: “The people have laid the foundation of short life through their diet, their rest, their labor, their doing this, that and the other in a wrong manner with improper motives at improper times.” ‘Let all things be in moderation’ is what we have here. “Suppose I say, ‘Come wife, let’s have a good dinner today.’ Well, this is a Victorian tradition, you see. What does she get? “Pork and beef, stewed, roasted, fried, boiled, potatoes, cabbage, onions, turnips, eggs, custard, pies of all kinds, cheese and sweet meats. Now I admit that my wife and I sit down and overload our stomachs until we feel the deleterious effects of it from the crowns of our heads to the soles of our feet, eyeballs protruding and belts snapping and everything else.” Then he says, “The whole system is disturbed by its operations and is ready to receive heart disease. A child begotten under such conditions is liable to be born with a tabernacle subject to pain and distress. Will all hearken to this plain statement? No. You might as well talk to the wild geese that fly over us.”

In a speech given in Provo on the Word of Wisdom Brigham Young says, “It has been an organic part of the church teachings at all times. Like the temple garments, it is a protection. It is an admonition to wisdom, giving appetites, desires and passions within boundaries it is to be considered with discretion. It is a protection from evil and designing men and from many things that can harm us.” These things are habit forming.

Now I want to talk about a good example of religious hobbyism. In 1833 the Saints commenced to build a temple in Kirtland. A mere handful of Saints commenced that work, but they were full of faith and energy. In a few weeks some of them apostatized. The trials were too great, the troubles were too severe. For instance, a certain family having traveled a long journey arrived in Kirtland and the Prophet asked them to stop and stay with them until they could find their own place. Sister Emma, meanwhile, asked the old lady if she would have cup of tea or coffee to refresh her after the fatigues of the journey. The whole family apostatized because they were invited to take a cup of tea or coffee after the Word of Wisdom was given. (After all, this was just a stimulant for an old lady. It wasn’t a coffee bust!)

Amasa Lyman once said “The Word of Wisdom is just that. It conducts us in a way of progress, which is a progressive repentance.’ A workaholic is as culpable as the alcoholic. The positive side of it is, “Don’t overwork. Don’t get yourself exhausted so that you need stimulants. You must go to bed early and rise early. Let your minds and bodies be rested. If you overwork, then you are breaking the Word of Wisdom because you are forcing yourself to fall back on these drugs to give you a pick up. The Word of Wisdom is nothing to flaunt before the world – it’s merely a means of assisting us in salvation and work for the human race. In 1967 Brigham Young said “The situation is not good in the Church.” He reminds them that the Word of Wisdom is not a fetish. The Word of Wisdom is one thing, and ignorance, superstition or bigotry is another. The again, he gives the story of an elder in Nauvoo who refused to administer to the sick

when he saw a teapot in the house! (There was no tea in the teapot, only some herbs.== they didn't have Brigham tea at that time.) We had a friend who refused to use Carnation milk because it was advertised to be used with coffee. That's being very puristic, isn't it?

Erastus Snow at the same conference said. "Don't make the Word of Wisdom a hobby to the exclusion of everything else so as to disgust people, but in the true spirit of the Gospel seek to bring the matter home to the hearts and understandings of the people. Feel after those who may be ignorant. BE instructed in these things is the important thing. (Stimulants and narcotics are even necessary sometimes, but this does not license their general use. Those who covenant have no option but to keep the Word of Wisdom.) Then he says. "Like money, it's right to have pharmaceuticals' sufficient for our needs, but they can be poison if overdone. Furthermore, they can be deadly." George Q. Cannon says, "not only stimulants but any extreme diet, any food fads, etc. And this goes for cholesterols, synthetics, sugar-free diets, all sorts of similar things.

"Having food and raiment, let us therefore be content," said Paul to Timothy. We can get into trouble if we start overdoing things. Orson Pratt said that a man should not constrain his family to obey it, but every man will have to give an account of his doings. Man may keep the Word of Wisdom as far as tea and coffee and tobacco are concerned and still come very short. If he wishes and contends to be right he must convey this together with all the commandments of the Word of Wisdom, for if you keep the Word of Wisdom but don't walk in obedience you will not receive health to the navel and marrow to the bones. That includes regulating our thoughts and all our doings.

In the sermons from the General Authorities from the beginning, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Word of Wisdom is far more advanced than we realized. Every time a new step is taken today we find that the Word of Wisdom anticipated it. For example: In 1870, Brigham Young said, "Why are these things so popular, and why are they bad? They narcotic spirits in these substances are the cause for their being so much liked by those who use them. They are habit-forming. Their most dangerous effects make them that." Everything that we eat contains poisons, but narcotics are habit forming. But the important thing, he mentioned, is the state of mind. One must be sober and clear-headed to receive revelation. Narcotics of any kind beget delusion, unreality. That's why we don't indulge in any excesses. We don't have the music, the lights, and the colors, the incense, the bells, the organ and all. Not in the temple. Cold and sober. It has to be like that. Orson Pratt said further, "Take the Word of Wisdom which is given for our benefit and our temporal salvation. It is true. Disobedience to it is not so gross as with some others, but still it is given for our temporal salvation and should be observed. We should preach it every two weeks to persuade this people to hearken to it. And yet they know it is the will of the Lord. They go away after hearing the most glorious discourse upon this and other revelations and perhaps they will keep the Word of Wisdom for two or three days, but it makes their head ache, so they take a little tea and it does them good for the moment, and it is such a trial! It must be a terrible trial, for the Lord said, "The weakest of all."

The Word of Wisdom is necessary for unity and cooperation. It's a form of common sense and honesty. Drugs, luxuries, self-indulgence, fashions and wealth: they all go together. The Word of Wisdom is simply a warning to beware of the world, and although it is a temporal revelation, the keeping of it will help us to keep the more eternal covenants we have made with our Heavenly Father.