

DID THE WORD OF WISDOM BECOME A COMMANDMENT IN 1851?

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JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, APOSTLE AND CHURCH HISTORIAN, once published an answer to an inquiry about when the Word of Wisdom became a commandment. His response, widely accepted as definitive both then and subsequently, was included in his popular *Answers to Gospel Questions*:

September 9, 1851, President Brigham Young stated that the members of the Church had had sufficient time to be taught the import of this revelation, and that henceforth it was to be considered a divine commandment. This was first put before the male members of the congregation and then before the women and by unanimous vote accepted.¹

Even a casual reading of nineteenth-century diaries and sermons suggests, however, that Smith's perception was not always the accepted view of his predecessors. This article will examine some of these nineteenth-century sources to see if this paradox can be resolved.

As first published, the actual text of the Word of Wisdom contained no explicit guidance on the question of its application. Originally beginning with what is now the fourth verse, the revelation simply stated that the Church had been "warned . . . and [I] forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation." Those who remembered "to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments," were to be blessed with health and "great treasures of knowledge."²

The publication committee which assembled the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 added an italicized introduction to this revelation (as they did to a number of others) informing members that this instruction was "sent greeting; not by commandment, or constraint, but by revelation and the word of

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wisdom, showing forth the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints. . . . Given for a principle with promise. . . .” For reasons presently unclear, this introduction was included as part of the revelation itself when the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants was published and thus was part of the revelatory text canonized in 1880.

Whatever the theoretical implications of these developments, the practical history of the Word of Wisdom followed a seemingly independent course. As Paul Peterson has amply shown, in the 1830s this revelation was preached and followed with very little consistency. Some members clearly viewed compliance with these words of wisdom as obligatory for good standing within the Church, while others unmistakably rejected this notion. While consumption of “strong drink” occasionally turned up among grounds for excommunication, other proscribed items remained widely, if temperately, used throughout the decade. By the 1840s the more tolerant attitude had been adopted by the Church at large. Nauvoo liberalized its liquor control laws, and Joseph Smith demonstrated by words and action that his personal approach was one of moderation rather than abstinence. The latter years of this decade saw a further relaxation of any practical proscription implied in the Mormon health code, and Mormon pioneers who could afford it included tea, coffee and alcohol among the staples they carried west. (The Mormon *Nauvoo Neighbor*, in fact, specifically recommended that each family take a pound of tea, a pound of coffee and a gallon of alcohol.) By 1851, the pivotal year in the Joseph Fielding Smith quotation above, adherence to the Word of Wisdom had been eroded even further by frontier conditions, and compliance may well have been at its nineteenth-century nadir.³

It is in this rather surprising context in a church conference of September 9, 1851, that Brigham Young addressed a theme to which he would periodically return over the coming years and re-emphasized the guidelines set forth in the Word of Wisdom. The published proceedings of that conference, as recorded in Orson Hyde’s *Frontier Guardian* and repeated in the *Millennial Star*, reveal that President Young indeed called for a vote on observance of the Word of Wisdom:

President Young rose to put the motion and called on all the sisters who will leave off the use of Tea, Coffee, etc., to manifest it by raising the right hand; seconded and carried.

And then put the following motion; calling on all the boys who were under ninety years of age who would covenant to leave off the use of Tobacco, Whiskey and all things mentioned in the Word of Wisdom to manifest in it like manner, which was carried unanimously.⁴

President Young also reportedly said that

Those who go with me, will keep the Word of Wisdom, and if the High Priests, the Seventies, the Elders, and others will not serve the Lord, we will sever them from the Church. I will draw the line and know who is for the Lord and who is not, and those who will not keep the Word of Wisdom, I will cut off from the Church; . . .⁵

This seems clear enough, though it must be remembered that the *Guardian* account is a summary rather than a verbatim transcript. Because it does not give exact details, it is open to interpretation, and Joseph Fielding Smith has interpreted the unanimous vote of the conference to be a formal acceptance of the Word of Wisdom as a commandment. Brigham Young's threat to "cut off" violators is therefore a confirmation that he intended it to be accepted as a commandment from that time forward. While Smith's interpretation is entirely consistent with this report of the conference, another interpretation seems to fit even better: that is, the vote was simply a personal commitment by those present to abstain from items condemned in the Word of Wisdom. Since subsequent statements by Brigham Young and his associates can be cited as support for both interpretations, a further examination of the evidence is in order.

In support of the view that after September 9, 1851, the Word of Wisdom was accepted by church leaders as a commandment, one can cite a statement by Parley P. Pratt on December 26, 1853, to the effect that young men who intended to get drunk and cause trouble at every opportunity should be "cut off from the Church."⁶ Even stronger is a statement by Brigham Young himself in October, 1859:

My counsel to the Elders of Israel is to let whiskey, brandy and other strong drinks alone. . . . It is my positive counsel and command that drinking liquor be stopped. . . . In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I command the Elders of Israel . . . to cease drinking strong drink from this time henceforth, until you really need it . . . [for medicine]. I now again request the authorities of this church . . . to sever from this society those who will not cease getting drunk.⁷

The following December the president further promised to "cut off from the Church" all "thieves, drunkards, and other offenders against good order, morality, and the well-being of society."⁸ That this was no idle threat is confirmed by Heber C. Kimball, who reported early in January, 1860, that "a few days ago" a drunkard had been severed from the Church, and that others would follow soon if they did not take pains to repent.⁹

Another case where Brigham Young seemingly viewed the Word of Wisdom as a commandment is in an address in May, 1870. In this instance he said that those who thought they "would die" if they could not have their tea would be better off to take to their beds and die than live and break "the requests of Heaven," and those who felt that they would die without their tobacco would die instead with it, "and they will die transgressing the revelations and commands of Heaven." While this sounds quite firm, his next statement considerably softened the position:

Now let us observe the Word of Wisdom. Shall I take a vote on it? Everyone would vote [in favor], but who would observe it? A good many, but not all.¹⁰

Had the vote twenty years earlier made the Word of Wisdom a binding commandment? An apparent answer came later in the sermon:

The observance of the Word of Wisdom, or interpretation of God's requirements on this subject, must be left, partially, with the people. We cannot make laws like the Medes and Persians. We cannot say you shall never drink a cup of tea, or you shall never taste of this, or you shall never taste of that. . . .

The notion of "commandment" is used again in a sermon by Brigham Young in March, 1862:

Why not govern and control the appetite that it may be subject to the law of Christ? But how is it? Why, "I must have some tobacco if I am damned for it . . ." Or, "I must have a cup of tea if I am damned for it . . ." It is like saying to our Heavenly Father, "I will not mind you, I will not obey your commandments, but I will have my own way and follow the bent of my own inclinations."¹¹

Another similarly strong statement came in May, 1867, when Brigham advised the Saints that "the Spirit signifies that we should cease drinking tea, coffee, and liquor, and chewing tobacco."¹²

In further support of a "commandment" interpretation can also be placed the testimony of Daniel H. Wells who, in April, 1869, used the term "covenant" when referring to the Word of Wisdom—reminding the Saints that they had entered into a covenant not to partake of substances condemned in the Word of Wisdom.¹³ Whether he had in mind some implied covenant entered into at baptism or something more specific, such as the vote of 1851, is not clear.

The assertion that the Word of Wisdom was *not* considered a commandment during the lifetime of Brigham Young is supported by a much larger body of evidence than the above. Consider, for example, the very pointed statement of Orson Pratt in May, 1855. After strongly urging his audience to observe the injunctions of the Word of Wisdom and to use their influence on others to do likewise he made this significant qualification: "I am aware that it is not by constraint, and a man should not constrain his family to obey it."¹⁴

As late as September, 1859, Heber C. Kimball complained that it was costing him too much to keep his household supplied with such items as coffee and tea.¹⁵ At about the same time Daniel H. Wells admitted that he liked to keep liquor in his home for use in cases of sickness,¹⁶ an attitude hardly consistent with the strict prohibition of Section 89 but quite consistent with President Young's earlier command to cease using alcohol except in cases of illness.

In an 1860 sermon Brigham Young took the brethren to task for their tobacco chewing, not because it violated a commandment, but because it was uncouth, immodest, filthy and offensive to those who observed the chewer. "If you must use tobacco, put a small portion in your mouth when no person sees you, and be careful that no one sees you chew it. I do not charge you with sin."¹⁷ Indeed it was not until the year of this sermon that Brigham himself gave up the use of tobacco.¹⁸ Three years later Daniel H. Wells scolded the bishops for sending tobacco users to haul stone for the temple,

expecting him to secure tobacco for them, and then failing to pay for it. He requested that in future they "either send men that do not use tobacco, or send them with a supply."¹⁹

Further evidence that the Mormon leadership did not view the Word of Wisdom as an established commandment is evident in their response to the economic threat of a growing Gentile mercantile establishment. Over a five-year period beginning in 1861, many statements were made by Young, Wells, Kimball and especially Apostle George A. Smith, encouraging local production of tea, coffee, tobacco and alcoholic beverages for the Mormon market in order to save the money that was being sent out of the territory to purchase these items.²⁰

Other statements made by officers of the Church during this time are also consistent with a condemnatory but permissive attitude. For instance, within two years of commanding the elders to stop indulging in strong drink, Brigham Young stated in April, 1861:

Some of the brethren are very strenuous upon the "Word of Wisdom", and would like to have me preach upon it, and urge it upon the brethren, and make it a test of fellowship. I do not think I shall do so. I have never done so.²¹

Two years later he is reported to have remarked, "You have read that excellent piece of advice called the 'Word of Wisdom'. I shall not say you must obey it; . . ." ²² In June, 1864, he said that he looked forward to the time when pure, locally produced wine would be available for use in the sacrament. "I do not know that it would injure us to drink wine of our own make, although we would be better without it than to drink it to excess."²³

Further light is shed by an 1865 statement of President Young:

I will not call upon you to enter into a covenant to do this [abstain from the use of tobacco] for some might break their covenants and that would be a sin, . . . yet I have no objection to aged persons, when they are fatigued and feel infirm, taking a little stimulus that will do them good.²⁴

It seems apparent from this statement that as late as October, 1865, the prophet did not consider some non-observance of the Word of Wisdom to be a serious sin unless the individual had made a specific covenant to observe the code.

In the Spring of 1867 the president was somewhat more forceful in his pronouncements, referring to the Word of Wisdom as "the word of the Lord," and telling his listeners that although they had a great many privileges, indulgence in liquor and other injurious substances was not one of them.²⁵ This position was affirmed in a sermon of Ezra T. Benson at the same conference. He reminded the audience that the Lord does not require anything of his children that they are unable to do, that he had been patient with them in this matter, and it looked as if "He is going to require these things at our hands." But he stopped short of saying that it was a commandment, explaining instead:

Supposing he had given the Word of Wisdom as a command, how many of us would have been here? I do not know; but he gave this without command or constraint, observing that it would be pleasing in His sight for His people to obey its precepts. Ought we not to try to please our Heavenly Father? . . .²⁶

A third sermon delivered on the same day as the two just noted also dealt with the Word of Wisdom. In this instance George Q. Cannon compared the foolishness of ancient Israel in not observing the *commandment* to sprinkle blood on their door posts with the foolishness of latter-day Israel in not heeding the *counsel* given in the Word of Wisdom.²⁷ The word "commandment" was avoided in the latter instance even though it would have made the comparison to ancient Israel much more forceful. The same type of omission is apparent in an address by the same speaker two weeks later.²⁸ In January, 1868, Brigham Young again appealed for a more strict observance of the Word of Wisdom, referring to it as the will of God, but with no intimation that he considered it to be mandatory.²⁹

The president's son, Brigham Young, Jr., in October, 1872, remarked that from the way the Word of Wisdom was being ignored he could only conclude that the people did not consider it came from God. He warned that if those called to occupy executive positions in the Church did not observe the Word of Wisdom "it will grieve the Spirit of the Lord, and if they do not turn and repent they will leave the Church. . . . The Presiding Elders of this Church are called to live the Word of Wisdom."³⁰

The last recorded remarks of Brigham Young on this subject were made in a sermon of April, 1877, shortly before his death. In this he referred to those men who partake of "those things which the Lord has warned us against, and which he has said are not good for man" as a disgrace to themselves and the name of saint,³¹—again, a statement that is in accord with an attitude of advice and counsel rather than a conviction that a positive commandment had been given.

An apparent clincher in this argument comes from George Q. Cannon three years after the death of Brigham Young in an address in Salt Lake City on July 25, 1880. After remarking that it is a very serious thing to trifle with the promise given in the Word of Wisdom, he made the following significant statement:

It [the Word of Wisdom] appeals to our sense of right that a commandment does not, because a commandment comes with strict injunctions which leaves no alternative but to obey; but this is a word of counsel by a kind father. . . .³²

There can be no misunderstanding this statement. Cannon, a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles and Brigham Young's last personal secretary, in mid-1880 did not consider the Word of Wisdom to be a commandment.

Thus there seems to be conclusive evidence that the Word of Wisdom was not thought of as a commandment by Brigham Young, his close associates or by the Church in general during the period of President Young's leadership. The idea to the contrary is unsupported by any substantial evidence. The vote

of the 1851 conference on the observance of the Word of Wisdom was apparently one of personal, individual commitment rather than acceptance by the Church of the Word of Wisdom as a commandment. On at least two other occasions during Brigham Young's administration, the suggestion was made that such a vote be taken again, but the President refrained from doing so lest the people make a covenant which he feared, from past experience, many would not succeed in keeping.

As Paul Peterson reconstructs the Mormon experience during the years of Young's administration, the last few years saw a temporary improvement in adherence to the Word of Wisdom. The years of President Taylor's administration were marked by much higher compliance. This was in large part a reflection of what Peterson has termed the "Word of Wisdom reformation of 1883-1884." Surprisingly, it was not until this late date that the Quorum of the Twelve pledged to "more fully observe the word of wisdom, as we have all more or less been negligent upon that point."³³

When and how then did some church leaders conclude that the Word of Wisdom had been formally accepted by the Church as a commandment? As a generation of younger men, raised in the Church in Utah, entered the ranks of the General Authorities a stronger position on Word of Wisdom observance developed. These men preached numerous sermons on the subject, urging that its observance be a test of worthiness and fellowship.³⁴ It seems to have been some of these sermons that gave birth to the idea that the Word of Wisdom had been declared by President Brigham Young in 1851 to be a commandment. In the October, 1894, conference Brigham Young, Jr., stated that

If I remember aright, I heard from this stand the servant of God say that the time was when the Word of Wisdom came to us as a word of persuasion and counsel, but now, he said, it is a commandment from God that this people observe it. Does anyone remember hearing those words from this stand more than twenty years ago? I remember it.
 . . .³⁵

No one immediately responded to Elder Young's query, but the next day Heber J. Grant commented that

Brother Brigham stated to us here yesterday that twenty years ago the Prophet of God laid it down to this people that the Word of Wisdom was no longer given merely by way of constraint [sic], but that it was from that time a commandment of God that we keep it.³⁶

In the next general conference Joseph F. Smith reinforced this idea when he said,

In the beginning it was not given by commandment, lest we should be under condemnation if we did not observe it; . . . In later times, however, it was revealed through President Brigham Young that we had reached a point in our experience when the Word of Wisdom became a law unto the people, and they were required to obey it.³⁷