

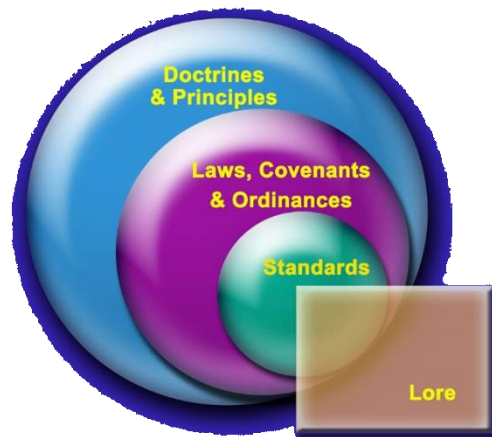
the things that got Brother Whitmer in trouble and eventually led him to the path of excommunication was his unwillingness to accept and adhere to the Word of Wisdom. (There were more serious charges against him also, but one of the charges was his unwillingness to obey the Word of Wisdom.)

On September 9, 1851, President Brigham Young presented to a general conference of the Church a motion to accept the Word of Wisdom as a commandment. This was 18 years after the revelation had been received, and from that point on the Word of Wisdom was to be considered a commandment. The Church voted to approve the motion. However, I wonder whether those members in the audience raised their arms in agreement understanding fully the implications of making the Word of Wisdom a commandment. It is one thing to accept, but another to adhere, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it took many years for that generation of members of the Church—especially rank-and-file members—to adhere to the Word of Wisdom. When President Lorenzo Snow was president of the Church the commandment that everyone was talking about was the law of tithing, because according to the assessment of the presidency, more than half of the members of the Church at the turn of the 20th century were not tithe payers. It was only in the early 20th century, October of 1908 to be more specific, that the First Presidency under President Joseph F. Smith a letter from to all priesthood leaders reaffirming the Word of Wisdom as a commandment. It seems that the Lord in his mercy gave the people of that generation sufficient time to get used to the Word of Wisdom.

We don't know exactly when it happened, but we know it was under President Heber J. Grant around 1919 that obedience to the Word of Wisdom finally became a requirement for temple attendance. And this is when we could say the Word of Wisdom really became part of the law of the Church.

Laws, Standards, and the Word of Wisdom

Before we discuss the stipulations of the Word of Wisdom, it might be helpful to consider the role of laws and standards in the gospel. Consider this diagram that I developed a few years ago (Martins, *False Images of Christ*, 2001). Growing out of the doctrines and principles we have laws, covenants and ordinances. Growing out of the laws, covenants and ordinances we have standards, and then hovering above all of these we have lore or popular wisdom.



What I mean by this diagram is that the first elements that we have in the gospel are those elements that are received by revelation through living prophets—the doctrines. Doctrines are fundamental truths, or the fundamental principles upon which the Lord establishes his course of action. A fundamental truth lies in the statement “God lives.” One cannot go the lab and prove or disprove that, so it’s just a fundamental truth. A matter of faith, yes, but still a fundamental truth. That’s a principle. There’s a principle called faith that cannot be measured, weighed, and one cannot touch it. It’s just a principle. These doctrines and principles are received by revelation.

Growing out of these doctrines and principles, we have laws, covenants and ordinances. We could conceive or define laws as the Lord's expectations for us. These are the constitution of the kingdom of God on the earth. These laws are also received by revelation and under normal conditions these laws are presented to the membership of the Church for a sustaining vote. Once they are accepted by the sustaining vote, which was the case with the Word of Wisdom, members of the Church are invited to make a covenant to obey that law. This covenant is very often administered through some kind of priesthood ordinance. So it could be baptism, or it could be the sacrament. There are also covenants we make through temple ordinances, in fact the majority of covenants we make are through temple ordinances, the endowment in particular, and once again all these are matters of revelation.

Then we come to standards. I consider standards the wisdom of living prophets through which they set specific behavioral boundaries or behavioral rules for each generation of members of the Church. Thus, the dress and grooming standards from the days of President Lorenzo Snow around 1900 are not the same as the standards from the days of President Gordon B. Hinckley around the year 2000. We envision that the standards of the year 2100 may also be different than today's standards.

Standards are set by living prophets as a tool to help the people obey the laws, thus living up to the covenants they have made. For example, let's take the law of chastity. The law of chastity is based on the doctrine of our divine filiation—that we are children of Heavenly Parents, as the Proclamation on the Family (1995) states. So that's the doctrine. We are children of Heavenly Parents, we came from above, and we are sacred beings by nature. Therefore, we have the law of chastity that states then that our bodies are sacred as well, and the procreative powers that are included in this body have to be preserved as sacred. Because of this law we have a behavioral rule in the form of a dress standard that states, "Our bodies must be properly covered." And so we have rules for dress and grooming growing out of the law of chastity.

I don't suppose that these standards necessarily need to be matters of revelation. For example, in the October 2000 general conference President Gordon B. Hinckley established a new standard for the Church dealing with tattoos and the body piercing. Whether or not that counsel was a matter of revelation is not the point. Of course, I wouldn't recommend anyone to disobey that because after all, he is a prophet and he has the keys of the priesthood. Thus, getting a tattoo may not keep anyone from entering the celestial kingdom, but knowingly disobeying the counsel from a living prophet could prevent a person from receiving certain important blessings.

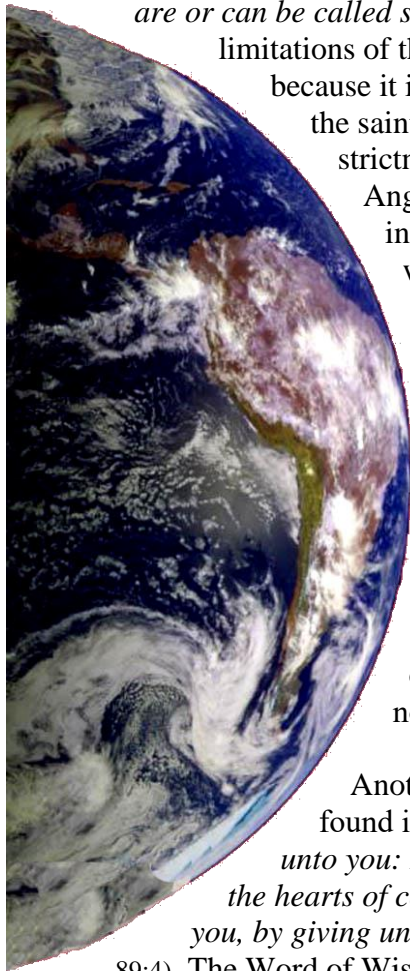
Then we have the popular wisdom or lore. Lore is just aphorisms, poems, adages and sayings and even banalities, the kind of stuff we often receive through e-mails. Some of this lore is hovering over our standards, laws and doctrines and some of these aphorisms agree with the gospel principles and the laws and covenants and standards that we have, but some does not agree.

Bounds and Conditions of the Word of Wisdom

We may define the Word of Wisdom as a set of rules that were accepted as a law for the Church. A revelation contained in the Doctrine and Covenants states the following: "*All kingdoms have a*

law given and there are many kingdoms, for there is no space into which there is no kingdom ... And unto every kingdom is given a law. And to every law there are certain bounds and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified.” (Doctrine & Covenants 88:36-39) Unto every law there are certain bounds, certain limits and certain conditions. Since we are talking about the Word of Wisdom, what could be its bounds and conditions?

Right in the preface to the Word of Wisdom we find that this revelation was “[g]iven for a principle with promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints.” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:3) These are the bounds and



limitations of the Word of Wisdom. It can never be too tough nor too strict because it is adapted to the capacity of the weak and even the weakest of all the saints. If we were to implement the Word of Wisdom with utmost strictness, we would probably not be allowed to breathe the air in Los Angeles, New York City, Mexico City, and several other metropolises in the world. In fact, the water consumed in many parts of the world might end up being against the Word of Wisdom as well because of contamination.

This is where a number of people have questions about the Word of Wisdom. We hear questions such as: “How come you Mormons don’t drink coffee but drink chocolate?” Simple. That is the result of implementing a principle adapted to the capacity of the weakest of all saints. So, one could say that there are some “holes” here and there, but thank goodness we have a God who is merciful. He gave us a commandment with some “holes” to ensure it would be adapted to the capacity of the weakest of all saints. So, if you like chocolate, enjoy it. If not, “get off my back” and let me enjoy it.

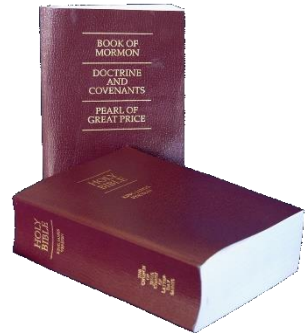
Another bound, another condition of the Word of Wisdom can be found in the following statement: “*Behold, verily, thus saith the Lord unto you: In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation.*” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:4) The Word of Wisdom was given because of evils and designs produced by conspiring men in the last days. So some of our brothers and sisters in traditional Christian denominations may say: “I’ve heard about your Word of Wisdom but I don’t find anything in the Bible that supports it.” Well, although there are some scriptures in the Bible that kind of resemble the Word of Wisdom, they never state it in the terms that we have in our time. Nevertheless, we can argue that in all ages of the world the covenant people have always been under some dietary regulation or another.

And so to those who would ask, “Christ and the disciples were drinking wine. What do you have to say about that?” I would respond by saying that the Word of Wisdom as we have nowadays was given to us because of evil and designs in the last days. Not from the days of Peter, James, and John and Paul. Not from the days of Samuel or Daniel. Sure, Daniel said: “Sorry, I don’t

want the king’s food. Give me some vegetables and fruits, and water.” (Daniel 1:8-12) The Apostle Paul told Timothy in one his letters: “*Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.*” (1 Timothy 5:23) The water was so filthy in those days that it carried all kinds of disease-producing microorganisms. If there had been a formal commandment establishing dietary norms in those days they would necessarily have been quite different than today’s Word of Wisdom. I am only bringing these examples to illustrate the conditions or limitations of the Word of Wisdom in the last days.

Stipulations Regarding Herbs, Animals, and Grains

Let’s look at a few other conditions of the Word of Wisdom: “... *all wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man—Every herb in the season thereof, and every fruit in the season thereof; all these to be used with prudence and thanksgiving.*” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:10-11).



And here’s yet another condition: “... *flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.*” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:12-13)

Sometimes it seems that just about everybody will have a different interpretation of what this means. What is “winter,” and what is “cold” for each one of us? What’s cold for one person is not going to be cold for another person. What would be considered a mildly cold day for some of our brothers and sisters in Minnesota or Siberia would call for a state of emergency to be declared in warmer climates. How can we respond to that? Well, the name of the commandment is: “The Word of Wisdom.” So we use wisdom. What is “sparingly” to each one of us? Since the Lord did not mention a specific quantity, we can define that ourselves. The Church will not micro-manage many aspects of our lives. We simply will employ common sense or wisdom. Each one of us can define in your own homes what

“sparingly” means, what “cold” or “winter” or “famine” means. With teenagers at home any day of the year is a time of famine. But instead of making a big issue out of it, we determine the meaning of these terms in our homes and that’s it.



The Lord stated in the revelation “*All grain is good for the food of man; as also the fruit of the vine; that which yieldeth fruit, whether in the ground or above the ground—Nevertheless, wheat for man, and corn for the ox, and oats for the horse, and rye for the fowls and for swine, and for all beasts of the field, and barley for all useful animals, and for mild drinks, as also other*

grain.” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:16-17) These are the conditions stipulated in the Word of

Wisdom in relation to the use of grains in general.

Now I'll take you to section 49 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Some may say: "Wait a minute. You were discussing the Word of Wisdom, and the Word of Wisdom is found in section 89."

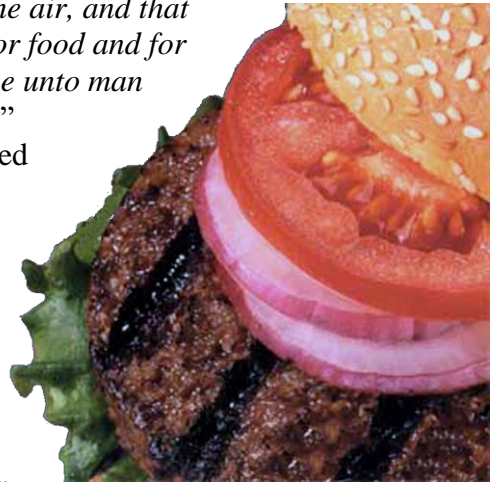
Yes, but look what the Lord had already revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith two years earlier:

"... whoso forbiddeth to abstain from meats, that man should not eat the same, is not ordained of God; For, behold, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and that which cometh of the earth, is ordained for the use of man for food and for raiment, and that he might have in abundance. ... And wo be unto man that sheddeth blood or that wasteth flesh and hath no need."

(Doctrine and Covenants 49:18-19,21) The Lord had already stated

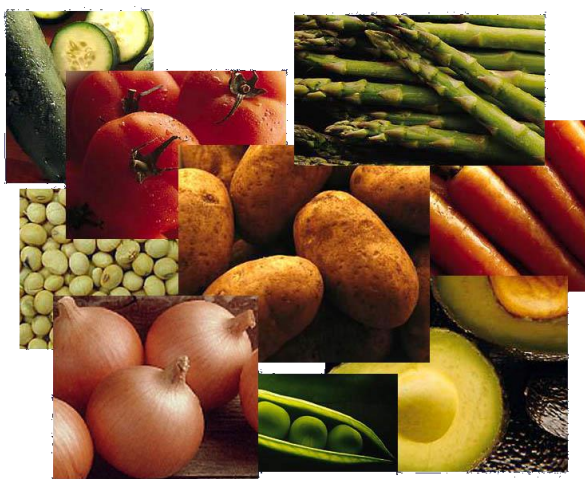
that these things were made for the use of men. I'm by no means an expert on animal psychology, but I think it is quite possible that animals instinctively feel it an honor to serve man. We're created in the likeness and image of God and our father Adam was called Lord over the earth, an honor we all inherit from him. Therefore, I think animals might feel it an honor to do serve us. That's the "end" or "measure" of the creation of those animals. But the Lord warns, "*... wo be unto man that sheddeth blood or that wasteth flesh and hath no need.*" (Doctrine and Covenants 49:21)

Animals should never be killed for fun; instead, the Lord stated that beasts and all of nature is ordained for the use of men for food and for clothing that he might have an abundance. The Lord also stated: "*... the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves.*" (Doctrine and Covenants 104:17) The natural resources of our planet were prepared for our subsistence and comfort. If they were used and managed wisely, we would never experience scarcity.



The Aesthetic and Social Function of Foods

There were a couple of revelations in the Doctrine & Covenants in addition to section 89 in which the Lord stipulated conditions regarding dietary habits. Turning to section 59 we find the



following statement: "*... all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart*" (Doctrine and Covenants 59:18) I love this passage of scripture because it shows that instead of just addressing a biological need in a purely mechanical manner—i.e. in mortality you need food, so here is this highly nutritious but bland, tasteless, synthetic stuff to feed you—the Lord states that he made food also "to please the eye and to gladden the heart." Looking at a portrait of several kinds of beautiful vegetables we notice in them a certain kind of aesthetic beauty. Their shapes, colors, and textures combined

with their flavors provide the complex sensory experience that we enjoy in our meals. Heavenly Father made things that are interesting to touch, pleasing to sight, aromatic to smell, and delicious to our taste. Foods, especially fruits and vegetables, have such an aesthetic beauty to them that painters through the ages have used them as models in their still life paintings. And the Lord said that He created them "... to please the eye and to gladden the heart."

The Lord added that He gave us these items "... *food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul.*" (Doctrine & Covenants 59:19) It's interesting that even in the scriptures we find this characteristic of food being used for social reasons. Want to entertain somebody, what do we do? We offer refreshments and hors d'oeuvres. Or if the person is a good friend, what do we do? We invite the person for lunch or dinner. And that's what the Lord is saying. Not only to strengthen the body, but to enliven the soul. To bring a certain kind of joy, a feeling that life is good. It is as if the Lord is saying, "I want you to have the pleasure of tasting how good this is—the flavor and also the smell." I love this scripture because it conveys the idea that although the mortal journey can sometimes be pretty tough, we still can enjoy a lot of good things that will bring us some fun moments in life.



The Extortion of Foods

In the revelation we read, "*And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion.*" (Doctrine & Covenants 59:20) It's an interesting thought that God is pleased to give us this food. He is neither upset nor uneasy—on the contrary, He is pleased He has given these things to us. But once again, what do we call the commandment? A Word of Wisdom. So, we are commanded to use these things not to excess. But the word in this passage that has always caught my attention was not the word "excess." I understood the idea of avoiding excesses, but what's this last word here? "Extortion?" What's that supposed to mean? So, I went to what I have nicknamed in my religion classes "the next standard work:" one of those big unabridged dictionaries.

Whenever I try to understand terms and concepts the Lord used in written revelations I go to dictionaries and learn what possible meanings those words have. Almost twenty years ago I had the privilege of working in Brazil on a new translation of the Book of Mormon for the Church. During the 1980's the Church commissioned new translations of the Book of Mormon into several languages. And if I could just open a parenthesis here, let me tell you that by working during weekends and evenings and holidays, it took me two years to translate the book. We know that the Prophet Joseph Smith translated most of the Book of Mormon in less than two months. That was about 58 days according to some accounts. I translated from English that I knew more or less, into Portuguese that I knew very well. He translated from Reformed Egyptian that he didn't know at all into English that he knew more or less because by some accounts the young Joseph Smith only had the equivalent of third grade education. That's just a little footnote on my personal testimony of the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon by the Prophet Joseph Smith. During the translation, I learned that words are imperfect tools and that we need to find out the meaning of the words in order to try to understand more deeply the

instructions and insights contained in the revelations.

And so I went to the dictionary and these are some of the dictionary definitions for extortion: “A gross overcharge” or “act of obtaining something by force or by perverse, distorted reasoning forced beyond what is reasonable or equitable.” President Joseph Fielding Smith once wrote the following about evil designs in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days: “... the time should come when wicked and designing men would resort to practices of adulteration of foods and drinks in order to get gain, to the injury of the health of their victims.” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, p.200) I suppose this clearly falls under one of the definitions of “extortion.” The Lord does not want us to use foods in perverse or distorted ways.

I think we can find one of the examples of “extortion” in the use of foods in the use of the coca leaf, found in the high Andes of South America. The population of that region of the world boil those leaves into a tea and use it to combat the dizziness caused by the thinner air at those high altitudes. Cocaine, on the other hand, is a completely different product. It’s obtained when the coca leave is submitted to manufacturing processes to increase the potency of its effects and give it addictive properties. And that’s an example of extortion of a leaf that otherwise can be used for good purposes.

President Smith added: “A safe guide to each and all is this: If in doubt as to any food or drink, whether it is good or harmful, let it alone until you have learned the truth in regard to it. If anything offered is habit-forming, we will be safe in concluding that it contains some ingredients that are harmful to the body and should be avoided.” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, p.201) So here’s a general rule: If some substance or food or drink is habit-forming, leave it alone. If we don’t know whether it’s good or not, let’s leave it alone until we find out more about it, and if it is habit-forming we’d better leave it alone for good because there is probably something that is not quite proper about it. Here is what Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated:

“Obviously, the standard of judgment must be uniform throughout the Church, and local officers are not at liberty to add other items to this list. However, there are many other substances which have a harmful effect on the human body, though such particular things are not specifically prohibited by the Word of Wisdom.

“Certainly the partaking of cola drinks, though not included within the measuring standard here set out, is in violation of the spirit of the Word of Wisdom. Harmful drugs of any sort are in a like category.

“Some unstable people become cranks with reference to this law of health. It should be understood that the Word of Wisdom is not the gospel, and the gospel is not the Word of Wisdom. As Paul said, ‘The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’ (Romans 14:17) ...

“There is no prohibition in Section 89, for instance, as to the eating of white bread, using white flour, white sugar, cocoa, chocolate, eggs, milk, meat, or anything else, except items classified under the headings, tea, coffee, tobacco, and liquor.

“As a matter of fact those who command that men should not eat meat, are not ordained of God, such counsel being listed by Paul as an evidence of apostasy. God has created ‘meats,’ he says, ‘to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.’ (1 Timothy 4:3)

“If some particular food or drink disagrees with an individual, then that person should act accordingly without reference to the prohibitions in this particular law of health.” (*Mormon Doctrine*, pp.845-846)

If you allow me a personal example, it so happens that I’m allergic to corn. But I’m not going to tell anyone, “You shouldn’t eat corn because it’s going to be bad for you.” No, it’s bad for me, so I add it to my “personal application” of the Word of Wisdom. But I don’t teach others to not eat corn. If something disagrees with the person, then don’t eat, don’t drink, but don’t go out and campaign, “You can’t have this, or you ought to have that, or if you eat this you shouldn’t have a temple recommend.” One cannot do that.

The Spiritual Dimension of the Word of Wisdom

Now we will take this discussion to a higher level and consider more spiritual matters. So far we have been dealing with bounds and conditions of the Word of Wisdom,



but now let’s talk about the connection between the spiritual and the temporal aspects of the mortal life. The Lord said: “*All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man ... neither Adam, your father, whom I created. Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but no temporal commandment gave I unto him, for my commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual.*” (Doctrine & Covenants 29:34-35)

How do we classify the Word of Wisdom? Is it temporal or is it spiritual? According to the Lord’s statement all things are spiritual to him. We know through latter-day revelations that we are spirits temporarily housed in mortal tabernacles, but we know very, very little about the connection between the temporal and the spiritual sides of our nature. The spiritual reality, or what happens on the spiritual realm, is veiled from us. Our mortal eyes can’t see any of these things. But even though details of this interaction have not been revealed, we can say this: that we are a product of our agency as we interact with the fallen environment. Our fallen environment often poses ambiguities, dialectics, and unanswerable questions. For example, from time to time we read about yet another scientific study claiming potential health benefits in drinking small amounts of wine or coffee. In our LDS communities, especially among the youth, we often hear the question “Is it acceptable to drink such-and-such beverage?” or “How much caffeine in a beverage would constitute a violation of the Word of Wisdom?” For me, such questions are just another version of an older question: “How far can I go without getting in trouble?” To which I answer: “Why go far at all?”

All the Lord is requiring from us is wisdom. We follow the stipulations of the Word of Wisdom because our sense of obedience and devotion to the Lord, and because of our desire to receive

spiritual guidance from him through the power of the Holy Ghost. Consider these words from Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Achieving spiritual sanctification matters more than scientific quantification.” (CES Conference, August 2002) Sure, there is no scientific proof to date that tobacco causes cancer, but we’re not worried about scientific proof. We’re worried about spiritual sanctification. Elder Boyd K. Packer said the following:

“Members write in asking if this thing or that is against the Word of Wisdom. It’s well known that tea, coffee, liquor, and tobacco are against it. It has not been spelled out in more detail. Rather, we teach the principle together with the promised blessings. There are many habit-forming, addictive things that one can drink or chew or inhale or inject which injure both body and spirit which are not mentioned in the revelation.

“Everything harmful is not specifically listed; arsenic, for instance—certainly bad, but not habit-forming! ...

“Surely the Word of Wisdom was given so that you may keep the delicate, sensitive, spiritual part of your nature on proper alert. Learn to “listen” to your feelings. You will be guided and warned and taught and blessed.” (“The Word of Wisdom: The Principle and the Promises,” *Ensign*, May 1996, p.17)

The Essence of Life and the Power of the Priesthood

Now we will take a look at the promised blessings of the Word of Wisdom. The Lord stated: “...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.” (Doctrine & Covenants 89:18) My parents and I were baptized in 1972 and since I was investigating the Church, I’ve always thought, “Health in the navel. I can understand that. But marrow to the bones...? What is the Lord talking about?”

Inside bone marrow we find a spectacular type of cells called “stem cells.” We know little about these cells at this time, but the little we know tells us that these cells are sort of “biological works in progress.” They can transform themselves into all kinds of other cells in the body—red blood cells, heart cells, muscle cells, brain cells. We can predict that there will be long legal and ethical debates over this, but at this point it may be safe to assume that at some point, even if it takes decades, governments will find legal ground upon which everyone will feel comfortable and research on stem cells will continue. The current expectation among scientists is that this will usher a revolution in medicine the likes of which we have not seen in a thousand years. Personally, I wonder whether we will finally discover the secrets of life itself and bring about the conditions mentioned in Section 101 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Based on this, whenever I think about the promise of “marrow in the bones” in the Word of Wisdom I wonder whether instead of just referring to physical health the Lord is referring to the essence of life itself, and to the magnitude or intensity of priesthood power that one may enjoy in this fallen world. Let me repeat: Obedience to the Word of Wisdom brings not just physical health, but allows us to tap into the essence of life itself and the increase the magnitude of priesthood power that we may enjoy in this fallen world.

Destroying Angels: the Word of Wisdom and the Word of Power

The last blessing promised in the Word of Wisdom is the following: “*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.*” (Doctrine & Covenants 89:21) And here again I’ve always asked: “What is this business about a destroying angel? What is the Lord talking about here?” Here are some thoughts:

“Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ.” (2 Nephi 32:3)

“... [Angels] minister according to the word of [the Lord’s] command, showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness. And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfill and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him.” (Moroni 7:30-31; brackets added)



Angels are ministering servants, and Nephi stated that they speak the words of Christ by the power of the Holy Ghost. The Lord also stated that worlds were created or destroyed through the word of His power. (Moses 1:32,35)

In the absence of further information, it is conceivable that the destruction the Lord referred to in the Word of Wisdom may be the result of the angels’ use of the word of God—the same word used to create worlds without number—to eliminate corrupt elements of the pre-millennial earth, ushering in the great Millennium. In some way yet to be understood the Word of Wisdom may prepare our bodies for this future cleansing. Bodies that to some degree will be found free from corrupt or extorted elements would be able to adjust to the radically different biological environment of the millennium. (Doctrine & Covenants 101:24-31)

I bear my testimony of the truthfulness of this commandment and of the blessings that we can derive from it. I know that God lives and Jesus Christ is our Savior. And I know that this revelation came from God.

Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.

The views and interpretations included in this essay are solely the author’s, and should not be considered official statements from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.