

Health of the Body

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Should a church be responsible for counseling members on physical health? Should a church provide guidance and support to its membership on matters relating to health? While everyone has the right to exercise their moral agency as it relates to the life style they lead, one might argue that a church has the responsibility to teach, counsel, and urge its members to live a healthy lifestyle so as to be a worthy temple of the Lord.

The Blessings of a Physical Body

By keeping our first estate in the pre-mortal existence we were given the blessing of a physical body, which body is referred to in the New Testament as the “temple of the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor. 6:19). As a temple of the Holy Ghost, our bodies are holy and God desires that we go to great lengths to care for our bodies, which will result in greater happiness and physical health.

The Word of Wisdom Concerning our Bodies

The world at large provides ample temptations for us to abuse our bodies with a variety of substances, even an excess of certain relatively healthy foods. To counsel us specifically on what we should and should not be doing in taking care of our bodies, the Lord has given us the *Word of Wisdom* found in the 89th section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This revelation from the Lord in 1833 provides clear directives on the do’s and don’ts of caring for our physical bodies and the spiritual benefits that will follow.

The second verse of the revelation states: “To be sent greeting; not by commandment or constraint, but by revelation and the Word of Wisdom, showing forth the

order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days—Given 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. 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” (D&C 89:2-4).

The Word of Wisdom is both a commandment and a guideline for all Christians who wish to keep their temple (body) healthy. By living the Word of Wisdom we can lay claim to other blessings that are outlined further in the revelation. We can also enjoy the blessing of avoiding the many sins that often flow from use of the substances identified in the revelation. Of particular relevance is the reference in verse 4 to “evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days,” meaning there will be in our day many who will encourage us to partake of many things that will lead us into sin.

Specific Counsel from the Word of Wisdom

Consider the following sections of the Word of Wisdom, which are generally regarded as commandments to the children of God, recognizing there is still the eternal element of moral agency for each individual.

Abstain from Alcoholic Drinks

We are directed to abstain from alcoholic drinks, which is referred to as “strong drinks,” also mentioning wine specifically that is not “pure wine of the grape of the vine, of your own make” (D&C 89:6).

Abstain from Tobacco

We are directed to abstain from tobacco in its various forms (cigarettes, cigars, chew, etc.) Tobacco can be used as “an herb for bruises and all sick cattle, to be used with judgment and skill,” but not for the human body (D&C 89:8).

Abstain from Coffee and Caffeinated Tea

We are directed to abstain from all forms of coffee (decaffeinated included) and caffeinated tea (herbal tea is not included), which are called “hot drinks” in the revelation (D&C 89:9). Although consumption of caffeine

as an addictive substance in drinks (hot and cold) is strongly discouraged, there are other elements in coffee and caffeinated tea that can be harmful to the body.

Focus on Wholesome and Healthy Foods

The Word of Wisdom is not only about what we shouldn't eat or drink, but is also about what we should be taking into our bodies. Wholesome herbs, fruits, vegetables, and grains should be eaten with "prudence and thanksgiving" (D&C 89:11).

Sparingly Partake of Certain Foods at Certain Times

While meats can be good for the body, in excess they can be dangerous to one's health. The Word of Wisdom approves the eating of flesh of birds and animals "sparingly," and most especially in times of winter when the body requires more protein to keep warm (D&C 89:12-13).

Working, Keeping Clean, and Staying Active

Along with the Word of Wisdom which focuses on nutrition, the Lord has given us clear directives on other matters of health: "Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated" (D&C 88:124). The book of Exodus reminds us that we should labor for six days before the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9), and that we should not strive to do more than we have strength to accomplish (D&C 10:4).

Abstain from Drug Abuse and Harmful Substances

Although not explicit in the Word of Wisdom, we are directed to abstain from all forms of illegal drugs and to use medicines only as necessary and directed by qualified medical personnel.

For Those Uncomfortable With Health Guidelines

I have a dear friend, Alex Kalamarides, who is Greek, a PhD. in Physics, and a business partner. He has told me on many occasions a Greek saying, "Παν Μέτρον Ἄριστον" or "Pan Metron Ariston", which translates loosely as "Everything in Moderation", or literally "All that is in Measure is Best." If everyone were to use the legal substances we are speaking of in this essay in moderation than most likely little harmful effects would ever be seen

in the average person. The challenge here is the word *moderation*, which in many ways is contrary to basic human nature.

One can find study after study that will either discourage or promote the use of alcohol, coffee, and red meat in moderation. Similarly, if you wish to find a study to support a particular habit you have, chances are you can find one. The question to be answered here is not whether these substances in moderation or excess are bad or good for a person and the community; rather, the question is whether or not the Lord's counsel to abstain from these substances is wise counsel for us as his children to follow on earth?

The key issues here are the often addictive nature of the substances in question and the tendency of the human race to be excessive in consumption and neglect the concept of moderation. For some people moderation is no problem and they are likely to consume responsibly. For many other people however moderation is more difficult. The Lord, knowing our human nature better than we will ever know it ourselves, has decided to call us to live a higher law by giving us the Word of Wisdom in 1833. By abstaining from potentially harmful and addictive substances and by limiting the consumption of others, we are able to serve God more fully and without physical or emotional hindrance; become closer to the Lord as a spiritually strong people; avoid the bondage of addiction that Satan so subtly uses to destroy us and our families; and enjoy the fruits of a better quality of life through improved physical health.

The Blessings of Maintaining a Healthy Body

While the Word of Wisdom focuses on the physical, the commandments given are spiritual (D&C 29:35). We will find it far more difficult to obtain a deep sense of spirituality if we are struggling physically as a result of poor decisions made on our part. As we embrace the counsel offered in the Word of Wisdom "the Lord promises to bless us physically and spiritually" (Gospel Principles, 195). The physical is referred to in this way: "[We] shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint" (D&C 89:20), while the spiritual is referred to in this way: "[we] shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures" (D&C 89:19).

Consider the results of a 14-year study conducted in 1987 with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who lived the Word of Wisdom: UCLA epidemiologist James E. Enstrom tracked the health of 10,000 moderately active LDS people in California, ending in 1987. Of these non-smoking, monogamous non-drinkers, Enstrom concluded from the study “that LDS Church members who follow religious mandates barring smoking and drinking have one of the lowest death rates from cancer and cardiovascular diseases—about half that of the general population... Moreover, the healthiest LDS Church members enjoy a life expectancy eight to 11 years longer than that of the general white population in the United States.” (Enstrom, JE. (1989 Dec). "Health Practices And Cancer Mortality Among Active California Mormons". National Cancer Institute. 6:81 (23): 1807–14. PMID 2585528).

As a capstone blessing, those who follow the Word of Wisdom are promised “that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them” (D&C 89:21). This blessing was interpreted by the prophet Spencer W. Kimball as being able to avoid spiritual death: “For observing the Word of Wisdom the reward is life, not only prolonged mortal life but life eternal” (The Miracle of Forgiveness, 211).

Conclusion

While the physical benefits of the Word of Wisdom are measurable in such studies, the spiritual benefits are equally powerful, yet not always quantifiable. Although we’re able to witness the manifestations of these promised blessings, both quantitatively and qualitatively, through our experiences and various studies, we are not able to measure all of these blessings collectively. Some of the most important blessings (wisdom, treasures of knowledge, and hidden treasures) will come at the individual level and are likely to be private and sacred in nature. Spiritual benefits come with clarity of thought and cleanliness of the body. Conversely, spiritual growth is inhibited, even taken away, through the repression of addiction.

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