

# Alcohol Prohibition in the Beehive: How the Word of Wisdom Became a Commandment

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**Abstract:** The word of wisdom, the religious commandment which regulates alcohol and tobacco consumption for the member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was first articulated as a principle with a promise, the observance of which was left up to the individual's discretion. During the second half of the 19th century church leadership moved towards stricter enforcement of the principle regulating alcohol and tobacco consumption. We argue that this intensification of religious behavioral standards in the Utah territory was a direct result of the quickly encroaching Transcontinental Railroad, the advancing federal government of the United States after the end of the civil war, statehood, the threat of being integrated into the larger market economy that came with both, and ultimately federal alcohol prohibition. The stricter behavioral standards for practicing Mormons allowed the church to continue to provide a wide array of public goods in the face of increased potential for trade with religious outsiders in and outside of the Beehive (Utah territory).

**Keywords:** Religion, Utah, *Word of Wisdom*, Club Goods

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The *Word of Wisdom* is a commandment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter LDS church) that prohibits the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and hot (caffeinated) beverages. In addition, it prescribes limited consumption of meat. The original revelation of the *Word of Wisdom* to the prophet of the LDS church, Joseph Smith, was merely a recommendation and articulated as a *principle with a promise*, the adherence of which promised health and well-being to any believer that followed it. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, church leadership moved towards stricter enforcement of the principle and it was eventually elevated to the status of a commandment with sanctions for violations in 1921.

The economics of religion literature, and in particular the literature on religious organizations as producers of club goods, suggests that behavioral standards, like stigma and sacrifices, are effective ways for religious congregations to screen out free riders that would otherwise undermine the collective production of such club goods (Iannaccone 1992, 1994). However, the same literature also suggests that such behavioral standards will usually weaken over time as income levels in any given religious community rise (Montgomery 1996). It therefore fails to account for examples of behavioral standards that increase in strictness over time, like the *Word of Wisdom* of the LDS church.

Using the history of the *Word of Wisdom*, we argue in this paper, that religious strictness among insular sects increases when the religious group responsible for particular club goods is faced with an increase in its interactions with the outside world.<sup>1</sup> When trade expands and wealth grows, the process for maintaining cooperation in a group also changes through both formal external constraints and changing norms and customs (Stringham 2011; Breton 1989). This was the case for the Utah territory starting in the 1860s.

We proceed as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on religious institutions as producers of club goods and explains the role behavioral standards play in this production process. Section 3 summarizes the history of the *Word of Wisdom*. Section 4 explains why Mormon behavioral standards became stricter in the late 19th and early 20th century. Section 5 concludes.

## I. CHURCHES, CLUB GOODS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SCREENING OUT FREE RIDERS

Club models of religious organizations emphasize that religious congregations function as mutual-benefit organizations dedicated to the collective production of public goods. In order to co-produce public goods, however, groups have to solve significant collective action problems. In most instances of modern religious congregations, the goods that are produced collectively include smaller scale public goods like worship services, social activities, and catechesis or religious instruction. In particularly well functioning religious organizations, the types of goods provided can be even more elaborate. Examples of these more expansive collective goods produced by religious organizations include welfare services, or more precisely the provision of monetary and material aid to the poor and the elderly, employment services, as well as economic development of the community.

Historically, mutual aid societies, which provided such services, were often associated with religious organizations (Beito 2000, Kahl 2005, p. 97 and Gill 2019). A religious organization that provides an expansive list of club goods to this day is the LDS church. The church currently provides counseling and welfare services to families through its LDS Family Services program; it provides employment services through its Employment Resource Service Centers; it operates LDS distribution centers, which sell Mormon temple garments as well as media related to the religion; and finally it operates Bishops Storehouses, which, organized like a grocery store, give out food and clothing to the needy.

As is the case with most other religious organizations, the club goods provided by the LDS church are both produced and consumed by active church members. An active member therefore increase the utility of all other members, while a free rider, who participates less frequently in the production of collective goods but yet consumes them nonetheless, undermines the coherence of the group and ultimately threatens collective production of club goods.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore essential for the institutions of any particular congregation to develop a method for reducing free riding to prevent exhaustion of the collective resource (McBride 2007).

Iannaccone (1988, 1992, 1994) as well as Murray (1995a, 1995b) show that religious groups use stigma and sacrifices to screen out free riders and mitigate the collective action problem. What may seem like excessively strict behavioral constraints and sacrifices from the perspective of any outsider, is therefore usually just an effective way to screen out less committed religious free riders. Simultaneously, such strictness also commits the remaining members more strongly, because they now pay a higher upfront cost of membership.<sup>3</sup> To function effectively, stringent behavioral constraints require a decentralized organizational structure or smaller groups to monitor member behavior. Stricter congregations will therefore usually be smaller or have greater subsidiarity.

Montgomery (1996) suggests that intergenerational social mobility will reduce the strictness of a particular denomination's behavioral rules. More specifically, he shows using a dynamic overlapping generations model, that as income increases, individuals prefer less strict rules as they start to increase nonsectarian variables in their utility function. A question that has received less attention in the literature is what factors can explain increased religious strictness? We suggest that increasing the number of outsiders who

come in contact with a group puts some pressure on the group to increase behavioral constraints. Using the example of the LDS church and in particular its behavioral rules regarding alcohol and tobacco consumption, we argue here that the threat of greater exposure to religious outsiders and a reduction in geographic separation from other religious groups or the secular world more generally will result in an increased level of strictness of any given religious group.

More specifically, religious groups use behavioral norms and rules to coordinate group behavior and to create solidarity among group members. As a result, such groups can more effectively co-produce collective goods. Historically, in the case of Utah, one important collective good was irrigation for subsistence farming in the high desert, without which Mormon communities could not have survived in the dry climate of the Mountain West. But even relatively secluded religious groups have difficulty surviving without trade with religious outsiders. Such trade brings group members into contact with conflicting norms and behavior standards, which can become a threat to group cohesion if members are persuaded to reduce their personal adherence to group norms. In the case of Mormons in Utah, such threats to group norms were particularly troublesome, because of the history of religious persecution the Mormon's had endured prior to moving to Utah and because of the central importance of collective goods production surrounding agriculture.

## II. THE HISTORY OF THE WORD OF WISDOM – FROM PRINCIPLE TO COMMANDMENT

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 the belly. ... Yea, 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. — Joseph Smith<sup>4</sup>

The *Word of Wisdom* (excerpted above) is a commandment of the LDS church that prohibits the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and hot (caffeinated) beverages. In addition, it prescribes limited consumption of meat. The commandment was revealed to the prophet of the LDS church, Joseph Smith, on February 27th 1833 in Kirtland Ohio. The original revelation was announced as a “Principle with a Promise,” which promised health, protection and wisdom to those that obeyed the principle. One theory as to the origin of the *Word of Wisdom* holds that it grew out of specific problems in the early church.<sup>5</sup> Brigham Young, contemporary of Joseph Smith and president of the church after Smith’s death, relates the following story regarding the origin of the principle in a sermon given on February 8th 1868 (Young 1869, p. 158):

The first school of the prophets was held in a small room situated over the Prophets Joseph’s kitchen, ... The brethren came to that place for hundreds of miles to attend school in a little room probably no larger than eleven by fourteen. When they assembled together in this room after breakfast, the first they did was to light their pipes, and, while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom, and spit all over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give the school instructions he would find himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke. This, and the complaints of his wife at having to clean so filthy a floor, made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the Elders in using tobacco, and the revelation known as the *Word of Wisdom* was the result of his inquiry.

The original revelation was not observed consistently among the faithful. Arrington (1959, p. 40) reports that “one large group of Mormon families... was advised in 1838 that they should not be ‘too particular in regard to the *Word of Wisdom*.’” It was explicitly not a commandment<sup>6</sup> and did not become a com-

mandment that was formally enforced through the institutions of the church until later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the prophet himself did not follow the principle to the letter. Arrington cites several instances of violations that are recounted in Smith's History of the Church,<sup>7</sup> among them the following entry after Joseph Smith attended the marriage of the apostle, John Boynton, where he was presented with

three servers of glasses filled with wine, to bless... [which] was then passed round in order...; and suffice it to say, our hearts were made glad while partaking of the bounty of the earth which was presented, until we had taken our fill; and joy filled every bosom, and the countenances of old and young seemed to bloom alike with cheerfulness and smiles of youth... (1959, p. 41).

Vance (2006) even reports that Joseph Smith operated a Saloon out of his own home in Nauvoo Illinois in the 1840s together with his bodyguard Orrin Porter Rockwell who later established a brew pub in Utah.

Brigham Young did not take steps towards stricter enforcement of the principle until the 1860s. As president of the church, he reinforced the tenants of the principle by asking the Mormon community to adhere to the principle more strictly. In addition, two church organizations, the Women's Relief Society and then men's School of the Prophets, which were organized in 1867, both required observance of the *Word of Wisdom* (Arrington 1959, p. 43). These reforms match closely with the timing of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. It was not until the early 20th century, however, that the principle became a commandment of the church, which it is to this day.

Another wave of reform comes around the time of Utah statehood, in 1896. Even faced with the prospect of new non-Mormon settlement, Mormon leaders were relatively ambivalent about the application of the principle. Alexander (1981, pp. 78-79) reports that:

in 1901, John Henry Smith and Brigham Young, Jr., of the Twelve both thought that the Church ought not interdict beer, or at least not Danish beer. Other apostles, like Anthon H. Lund and Matthias F. Cowley also enjoyed Danish beer and currant wine. Charles W. Penrose occasionally served wine. Emmeline B. Wells, then a member of the presidency and later president of the Relief Society, drank an occasional cup of coffee, and George Albert Smith took brandy for medicinal reasons. Apostle George Teasdale, agreeing with President Woodruff, thought that no one ought to be kept from working in the Sunday School because he drank tea and that eating pork was a more serious breach than drinking tea or coffee.<sup>8</sup>

In 1901, Joseph F. Smith, a strong proponent of prohibition, became president of the church. Under his leadership, the First Presidency together with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (hereafter: the Twelve) agreed to not allow people to join the church who either operated or frequented a saloon, thereby focusing on stricter enforcement of the principle's recommendation regarding the consumption of alcohol. They also urged local stake presidents<sup>9</sup> to refuse to allow blatant violators of the principle to enter the temple (by withholding the necessary *temple recommend* which is required to participate in the ritual) and only make exceptions for old men who smoked and old ladies who drank tea. Following these changes in emphasis, the Twelve promoted a stricter adherence to the *Word of Wisdom* publicly and even substituted water for wine in the sacrament in their temple meeting starting in 1906 (Alexander 1981, p. 79). Finally, in 1921, church leadership made adherence to the *Word of Wisdom* a requirement for admission to the temple, which formally turned the principle into a commandment with institutional sanctions.<sup>10/11</sup>

With respect to the prohibition of alcohol, the *Word of Wisdom* may be seen as reflecting a broader trend towards prohibition in the rest of the country. The 18th amendment had just been ratified by the required number of states to make it into a law in January 1919. By contrast, the commandment included a broader set of requirements beyond alcohol. This more comprehensive focus suggests that church leadership maintained an interest in the prohibition of the other items listed in Joseph Smith's original revelation and was not just swept up in the prohibition fervor of the times. In the early 1920s the church began a more

forceful campaign against tobacco use that included attempts to pass anti-tobacco legislation and in particular legislation preventing advertising of cigarettes on billboards. Around the same time, some members of the Church started arguing that the *Word of Wisdom* ought to include other caffeinated beverages such as Coca-Cola (Alexander 1981, p. 84).

The literature on churches as producer of club goods explains why stigmata and sacrifices are important for the success of collective public goods production (Iannaccone 1992, 1994), but it suggests that over time, as members become increasingly wealthy, congregations will become less strict in their application of behavioral standards (Montgomery 1996).<sup>12</sup> Prohibitions of any time help to mitigate against complacency with regards to in-group and out-group monitoring as wealth increases. The Utah case is one of a broader set of cases that brings this problem into sharper relief. How is it then, that in the case of the LDS Church, the strictness of behavioral standards increased over time? The following section provides an explanation for the increasingly strict application of the *Word of Wisdom* in the LDS church.

### III. THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Previous work in the economics of religion suggests that religious free riders will undermine collective production of public goods and weaken congregational coherence. We argue here that the *Word of Wisdom* and more specifically the prohibition of alcohol and tobacco among Mormons became binding commandments to facilitate greater coherence among the faithful in Utah when the LDS community in the western territory was faced with an encroaching federal government, the advance of the transcontinental railroad, and the subsequent assimilation into the larger market economy of the United States after the civil war. Stricter behavioral standards for believers and more intensive collective goods production, which was directly promoted by the leadership of the church, effectively excluded outsiders from participation in the local economy and from benefiting from the collective goods produced by believers in the state. In consequence, “the economic and social changes in Utah were never as great as those which transformed other western states” (Arrington 1951, p. 143).

In the 1860s, Mormon leaders started to promote stricter adherence to the principle because they believed it would facilitate economic development of the state of Utah. More specifically, President Brigham Young and other leaders of the church were convinced that resources should stay in the Utah territory rather than being spent on imported items like alcohol and tobacco. They initially promoted local alternatives to facilitate this goal but quickly turned to a more rigorous interpretation of the *Word of Wisdom*. Arrington (1959, p. 43) argues that “separated as they were from the United States by over 1,500 miles of treeless plains, hounded as they had been by hating ‘mobocrats,’ it was necessary for the Latter-day Saints to develop and maintain a self-sufficient economy in their Rocky Mountain retreat.” More specifically, he suggests that economic independence and in particular “husbanding of the [scarce] cash resources of the community” were the main motives of church leadership in promoting adherence to the *Word of Wisdom*, the result of which was less intensive trade with outsiders and a reduced outflow of cash resources as well as greater economic independence. The focus on limiting the outflow of cash resources as a result of liquor and tobacco imports was justified on the basis that the money was needed for more urgently needed imports of heavy machinery and equipment, which would allow for faster economic development of the territory. The Mormon community in Utah was still largely an agricultural society. Its high cost irrigation agriculture could not compete with cheap imports from the plain states, however, and the territory did not have any other significant industrial capacity that could guarantee employment for the faithful in the face of cheap imports from the remainder of the country. Church leadership therefore deemed it necessary to collectively focus on the economic development of the territory while at the same time keeping out outsiders who might destroy group coherence. Because of their recent history of persecution, the Latter Day Saints had another strong reason for high levels of within group solidarity and exclusion of outsiders.<sup>13</sup> In the model the Mormons were promoting for their community, the monopoly production of collective goods provided infrastructure, but also created dependency on the community both to participate and tithe in order to finance collective goods

production. The bundle of goods produced collectively included redistributive programs, grain storage facilities, and irrigation, which was crucial for agriculture in the high desert.

In line with this general promotion of economic independence in a wide range of activities, Brigham Young explicitly promoted the production of wine made from Utah grown grapes, the growing of tobacco in the Utah territory, he developed a locally produced “Mormon” tea and even encouraged the consumption of such local options over the importation of “foreign” substitutes. In fact, the territorial legislature granted the exclusive right to manufacture and distribute Whiskey in the Utah territory to Brigham Young in 1873 (Vance 2006), which most likely happened in an effort to promote local alternatives in addition to securing monopoly profits for the church president. These efforts of promoting locally produced substitutes for imports were directed at promoting economic independence, while the more rigorous application of the *Word of Wisdom* was intended to increase group cohesion in the face of an influx of non-Mormon labor, which seemed to threaten the collective production efforts of the LDS community in Utah that were directed at economic independence. In this way, the *Word of Wisdom* served two important purposes: it increased group coherence and freed up resources previously spent on imports of alcohol, tobacco, and tea/coffee for the purchase of locally produced alternatives and thereby helped to grow the local economy. For its leadership, stricter adherence to the *Word of Wisdom* and the economic independence it could facilitate seemed essential for the survival of the Church in Utah.<sup>14</sup>

The advance of the Transcontinental Railroad (completed 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah) not only connected Utah to the larger market economy of the United States, it also increased the probability of an expansion in mining in the territory. The extensive mineral deposits in the Wasatch Range had so far been unprofitable to exploit because of the high cost of transport to either of the densely populated coast regions. The advance of the railroad promised a cheap way to transport mining exploits and therefore made mining a profitable venture in the Utah territory. Leonard Arrington (1951) argues that church leadership was opposed to more intensive mining activities in the state for mainly two reasons. First, mining was perceived to have a disintegrating moral influence, but in order to build a permanent society of a unified people, orderly development of local resources was needed. Second, because mining only offered employment until the mines were exhausted, it was similarly destructive to the building of a more permanent society. In addition, all of the significant deposits of minerals in the territory were owned by non-Mormons, which meant that any potential gains from opening up the mines would go to the “enemies” of the church” (Arrington 1951, p. 146) in Utah.

To mitigate the undesirable consequences of the coming of the Transcontinental Railroad, the School of Prophets, a men’s organization of the church, was organized in 1867, to prevent an influx of individuals who might threaten the morality of the community through drunkenness and gambling. The school’s main endeavor in this regard was to sponsor a contract to construct the Union Pacific Railroad for a ninety mile stretch through the most populated areas of the territory. By employing only Mormon workers on this stretch of the railroad, the undue influences of foreign workers in the state was limited.

As previously suggested, the School of the Prophets was also instrumental in advancing a stricter interpretation of the *Word of Wisdom*, which suggests that the goals of temperance and economic independence were two sides of the same coin of facilitating the survival of the Mormon community as coherent whole in the Intermountain West. As this coherence broke down, first when non-Mormon workers came to build the railroad in the 1860s, then after Utah became a state in 1896 as immigration increased, and then finally in the 1910s as immigration continued. According to the US census, population of the Utah Territory doubled from 1860 to 1870, from 40,2763 to 86,786, increased to 276,749 in 1900, and was 449,396 by 1920 (Powell 1994).

## IV. CONCLUSION

Religious communities will tend towards stricter interpretation of behavioral norms (stigma and sacrifices) when threatened with an overall greater exposure to religious outsiders. In the case of the LDS church in Utah, the extensive collective goods production of the Mormon community was endangered when in the wake of the encroaching Transcontinental Railroad, a large number of non-believers were threatening to enter the territory. Because they would have benefited from any existing public goods that had been produced by the Mormon community, such as extensive irrigation canals, roads, and public safety, without contributing to their production, they represented a significant threat to the unity of the community. In order to fend off this imminent threat and secure the unity of the community, church leadership followed a two-pronged strategy of promoting group coherence through more rigorous application of the *Word of Wisdom* while at the same time promoting the goal of economic independence of the territory.

By offering an example of the dynamics of the development of religious norms over time and, in doing so, contributing to the literature on institutional development, this paper provides a way to help us think more broadly about how isolated groups and communities respond to greater openness. The more recent example of the LDS church withdrawing from the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) may offer an example with a similar dynamic. As the BSA became more accommodating of changing secular norms in the broader culture, it moved away from the norms prevalent in most Mormon communities, and, as a result, became a threat to the coherence of Mormon communities with BSA troops.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Berman (2000, p. 906) gives examples where economy wide rising standards of living produce groups of “Ultra-orthodoxy” specifically leading to increased fertility, reductions in labor supply outside the home, and other extreme responses consistent with insular club good production.
- 2 See Carr and Landa (1983), Sullivan (1985), Wallis (1990), Chiswick (1991), and Iannaccone (1992) for an explanation of the household's religious production function, which depends on the quality of the group and the inputs of the other group members.
- 3 Olson and Perl (2001) show that the prediction that greater sacrifices and behavioral standards result in greater member commitment holds empirically between different denominations.
- 4 The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Section 89, <http://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/89.1-9?lang=eng>
- 5 Another theory as to the origin of the principle holds that it grew out of the early 19th century temperance movement. For an exponent of this theory see McBrien (1929).
- 6 The text of the *Word of Wisdom* states in paragraphs 2 “not by commandment of constraint, but by revelation and the word of wisdom...”.
- 7 The complete text of the History of the Church by Joseph Smith is available online: <http://byustudies2.byu.edu/hc/hcpgs/hc.aspx>, accessed November 5th 2012.
- 8 A note on the organizational structure of the LDS church is in order: The LDS church is organized in a hierarchical priesthood structure that is lead by the President of the Church, called the Prophet, together with two counselors, who form the First Presidency. The First Presidency directs the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which in turn directs the Quorums of Seventy as traveling ministers, and the Presiding Bishopric. These four levels of leadership form what is called the general authorities who exercise the leadership of the church and direct regional efforts of the five auxiliary organizations of the church: the Relief Society (a women's organization), the Young Men and Young Women organizations (adolescents ages 12 through 18), Primary (an organization for children up to age 12), and Sunday School. For more information see [www.churchofjesuschrist.org](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org).
- 9 A LDS stake is an administrative unit composed of multiple (between 5 and 16) congregations called wards. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/stake-president>, accessed November 5th 2012.

- 10 Adherence to the Word of Wisdom was first listed as a requirement for entry to the temple in the 1928 edition of the General Handbook of Instructions, which guides ward bishops and stake presidents on church policy (Alexander 1981, p. 82).
- 11 Despite the movement towards religious prohibition of alcohol, unlike a number of other states, Utah did not pass a statewide prohibition bill until 1917.
- 12 An interesting implication of this literature is that trade and wealth tend to erode small group cohesion and the stigma and sacrifices that create cohesion, but increase openness to outsiders. This idea has been termed the “doux commerce thesis” (Hirshman 1992, pp. 41-43). Collective production of public goods, on the other hand, requires small group cohesion and exclusion of outsiders and in particular free-riders. In the case of the LDS church portrayed in this paper, church leadership seems to have taken explicit steps to limit trade with outsiders in order to limit these group cohesion eroding influences, which would have made public goods production within the church more difficult.
- 13 The extra-legal death of Joseph Smith in Missouri (1844) and the experience of the Mountain Meadows Massacre (1957) are two tangible experiences of conflict that the settlers had in mind when contemplating peaceful relationships with non-Mormon settlers in Utah.
- 14 An insightful reviewer points out that, as a result of the fact that the renewed interest in the Word of Wisdom coincided with a movement towards import substitution, the coalition of Protectionists and Prohibitionists (similar to Yandle’s (1983) coalition of bootleggers and Baptists) were able to jointly promote the increased strictness of the principle while also joining efforts regarding the granting of local monopolies.
- 15 We are grateful to the reviewer for offering the example of the Boy scouts of America as another potential case in point.

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