

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Mormon Medical Ethical Guidelines

EDITED BY LESTER E. BUSH, JR.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, James O. Mason, then Church Commissioner of Health, prepared a paper entitled "Attitudes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Toward Certain Medical Problems." This document, dated 3 June 1974, consists of nineteen short statements which were all submitted to the First Presidency for approval. These statements were later included in the Solemn Assemblies held in 1976.

The full text of the commissioner's paper is given below, followed by supplemental notes prepared by the editor.

ATTITUDES OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS TOWARD CERTAIN MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Abortion

The Church opposes abortion and counsels its members not to submit to, perform, nor abet an abortion except in the rare cases where, in the opinion of competent medical counsel, the life or good health of the mother is seriously in danger or where the pregnancy was caused by rape and produces serious emotional trauma in the mother. Even then it should be done only after consulting with the local presiding priesthood authority and after receiving divine confirmation through prayer.¹

Artificial Insemination

The Church does not approve of artificial insemination with other than the semen of the husband. Artificial insemination with semen other than from the husband may produce problems related to family harmony. The Church recognizes that this is a personal matter which must ultimately be left to the determination of the husband and wife with the responsibility for their decision resting solely upon them.²

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Birth Control

The Lord's command imposed upon all Latter-day Saints is to "multiply and replenish the earth." Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor and are free from inheritable defects that would be entailed upon their posterity, it is contrary to the teachings of the Church artificially to curtail or prevent the birth of children. We believe that those who practice birth control will reap disappointment by and by. The Church feels that husbands must be considerate of their wives who bear the greater responsibility not only of bearing children, but of caring for them throughout childhood. To this end the mother's health and strength should be conserved and the husband's consideration for his wife is his first duty, and self-control should be a dominant factor in all of their relationships.³

Dissection and Autopsies

The Church does not object to the performance of autopsies upon deceased persons, providing that the applicable laws governing autopsies are complied with and that the loved ones of the deceased give their consent.

Prolongation of Life and Right to Die

The Church does not look with favor upon any form of mercy killing. It believes in the dignity of life and that faith in the Lord and medical science should be appropriately called upon and applied to reverse conditions that are a threat to life. There comes a time when dying becomes inevitable; when it should be looked upon as a blessing, and a purposeful part of mortality.

Organ Transplants

The question of whether one should will his bodily organs to be used as transplants or for research after death must be answered from deep within the conscience of the individual involved. Those who seek counsel from the Church on this subject are encouraged to review the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, to implore the Lord for inspiration and guidance, and then to take the course of action which would give them a feeling of peace and comfort.⁴

Religion and Healing Process ("Faith Healing")

The Church believes in the same manifestations of the Spirit, including healing, that existed in the Church organized by the Savior during His earthly ministry. Through Latter-day revelation the Lord has directed:

"... And the elders of the Church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them (the sick) in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me."

Sunday (Sabbath) Observance

The Church accepts the commandment given by the Lord that men are to rest from all temporal work and to worship the Lord one day each week. Sunday is the day set aside by the Church to observe the Sabbath. Rest on this day, though important, is incidental to the true purpose of the Sabbath

which is to worship, to learn more about the Lord, to renew covenants with Him and to feed our souls upon the things of the Spirit.

Dietary Laws

The Church's law pertaining to proper diet and care of the body is contained in a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith under date of February 27, 1833. That revelation admonishes Church members to use judgment and temperance in the use of all food and drink. It prohibits the use of alcoholic beverages, hot drinks (interpreted to mean tea and coffee) and tobacco. It also prohibits the use of all other substances which may be injurious to the body or which might be said to be in violation of the spirit of the revelation. It also encourages the sparing use of meats but prohibits none outright. On the affirmative side, this health code encourages the eating of all fruits and vegetables and encourages the use of whole grain.⁵

Sterility Tests

The Church believes that having children is a blessing and privilege and, that with any abnormal condition, it is appropriate to use medical science to diagnose and restore normal function.

Religious Sacrament

Within the beliefs of the Church, the term "sacrament" refers only to the celebration of the Lord's Supper wherein bread and water are blessed and partaken of in symbolic remembrance of the flesh and blood of the Savior and by the way of recovenant by the partaker to adhere to the Savior's teachings. The Church ordinance specifically related to the sick or dying is the laying on of hands by the elders for the healing of the sick (see Religion and Healing process).

Burial of Fetus

The Church has no official service for the burial of the fetus. What is done would depend upon the age and size of the fetus and the attitude of the parents, after discussion with their bishop.

Cremation

The Church has never encouraged cremation as a method of disposing of the remains of the dead. It believes it is proper to consign them to mother earth which has always been the custom. Although cremation is discouraged, the local laws must be observed and the final decision left with the family and the loved ones.

Attitudes Toward Narcotics, Vaccines, Blood, etc.

The Church regards the use of these substances, as prescribed under medical supervision for the treatment or prevention of disease, as wholly a medical question.⁶

Homosexuality

The Church looks upon the homosexual act as a physical perversion, and Church leaders are advised to approach those who engage in this practice in the true spirit of the gospel of love and understanding in an effort to assist

them and persuade them that repentance can bring them forgiveness from such transgressions.⁷

Experimentation

The Church recognizes the need for carefully conducted and controlled experimentation to substantiate the efficacy of medicines and procedures. We believe, however, that the free agency of the individual must be protected by informed consent and that a qualified group of peers should review all research to ascertain that it is needed, is appropriately designed and not harmful to the person involved.

Sterilization

The Lord's commandment imposed upon all Latter-day Saints is to "multiply and replenish the earth." Nevertheless there may be medical conditions related to the health of the mother where sterilization could be justified. But such conditions, rare as they may be, must be determined by competent medical judgment and in accordance with laws pertaining thereto.⁸

Blood and Blood Products

See *Attitude Toward Narcotics, Vaccines, Blood, etc.*

Hypnosis

The Church regards the use of hypnosis under competent, professional supervision for the treatment of disease as wholly a medical question. The Church advises members against participation in hypnosis demonstrations.

NOTES

¹Of all medical ethical guidelines published by the Church, those relating to abortion are the most emphatically stated. Offenders, be they doctor, patient, or abettor, are subject to excommunication. Mission presidents are advised to ask prospective converts, during pre-baptismal interviews, if they have previously submitted to an abortion, and to provide special counseling to those who have. Male members who have "advised, encouraged, consented to, or arranged for the performance of an abortion growing out of their immoral conduct" are not called on full-time missions, nor are women who have submitted to abortions under similar circumstances. Ironically, while abortions are *not* condoned even where the fetus is known to be malformed, the Church has taken no stand on the subject of performing or undergoing amniocentesis as an antenatal check on the status of the fetus—a procedure for which there is virtually no justification if abortion is not considered an acceptable alternative.

The full text of the most recent First Presidency statement on the subject of abortion states:

The Church opposes abortion and counsels its members not to submit to, be a party to, or perform an abortion except in the rare cases where, in the opinion of competent medical counsel, the life or health of the woman is seriously endangered or where the pregnancy was caused

by forcible rape and produces serious emotional trauma in the victim. Even then it should be done only after counseling with the local bishop or branch president and after receiving divine confirmation through prayer.

Abortion is one of the most revolting and sinful practices in this day, when we are witnessing the frightening evidence of permissiveness leading to sexual immorality.

Members of the Church guilty of being parties to the sin of abortion are subject to the disciplinary action of the councils of the Church as circumstances warrant. In dealing with this serious matter, it would be well to keep in mind the word of the Lord stated in the 59th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verse 6, "Thou shalt not steal; neither commit adultery, nor kill, nor do anything like unto it."

As far as has been revealed, the sin of abortion is one for which a person may repent and gain forgiveness. (July 1976)

²More recent guidance on this subject has been somewhat more lenient. The latest First Presidency statement, given 19 April 1977, advises:

The Church discourages artificial insemination with other than the semen of the husband. Artificial insemination with semen other than the husband may produce problems related to family harmony. The Church recognizes that this is a personal matter which must ultimately be left to the determination of the husband and wife with the responsibility for their decision resting solely upon them.

A child born by means of artificial insemination after parents are sealed in the temple is born in the covenant. A child born by artificial insemination before parents are sealed may be sealed subsequent to the sealing of parents.

³The only officially released statement of the First Presidency in recent years on the subject of birth control remains that of 14 April 1969:

The First Presidency is being asked from time to time as to what the attitude of the Church is regarding birth control. In order that you may be informed on this subject and that you may be prepared to convey the proper information to the members of the Church under your jurisdiction, we have decided to give you the following statement:

We seriously regret that there should exist a sentiment or feeling among any members of the Church to curtail the birth of their children. We have been commanded to multiply and replenish the earth that we may have joy and rejoicing in our posterity.

Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor and are free from impurities that would be entailed upon their posterity, it is contrary to the teachings of the Church artificially to curtail or prevent the birth of children. We believe that those who practice birth control will reap disappointment by and by.

However, we feel that men must be considerate of their wives who bear the greater responsibility not only of bearing children, but of caring for them through childhood. To this end the mother's health

and strength should be conserved and the husband's consideration for his wife is his first duty, and self-control a dominant factor in all their relationships.

It is our further feeling that married couples should seek inspiration and wisdom from the Lord that they may exercise discretion in solving their marital problems, and that they may be permitted to rear their children in accordance with the teachings of the gospel.

Additional background on Church teachings on birth control and abortion is provided in Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Birth Control Among the Mormons: Introduction to an Insistent Question," *Dialogue* 10(2):12-44 (Autumn 1976).

In response to an inquiry to the Church's Public Communications Department, the following statement by the First Presidency on the related subject of sex education was provided, without date:

We believe that serious hazards are involved in entrusting to the schools the teaching of this vital and important subject to our children. This responsibility cannot wisely be left to society, nor the schools; nor can the responsibility be shifted to the Church. It is the responsibility of parents to see that they fully perform their duty in this respect.

⁴The text is identical to a private response by the Secretary to the First Presidency, as authorized by them, in October 1970.

⁵There is only one official, general statement of Mormon dietary laws: Section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, alluded to in the Commissioner's statement. Key passages, known verbatim by many Mormons, include:

That inasmuch as any man drinketh wine or strong drink among you, behold it is not good. . . 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. . .

And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly. . . .

. . . 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. . . 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; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.

All grain is ordained for the use of man and of beasts, to be the staff of life . . . 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. . .

While there has been considerable discussion over the years as to the specific application of some of the guidelines in this Word of Wisdom, no official First Presidency statements have been issued publicly on the subject.

From the first decades of the twentieth century, however, the First Presidency has instructed local leaders that members who do not abstain from coffee, tea, tobacco and alcohol should not be given the priesthood, sent on missions, admitted to the temple, or given leadership positions in local congregations.

The rare instances in which official statements have been released publicly have generally been directed at legislation relating to the availability of alcohol or tobacco. Perhaps the most recent example was a statement of 21 October 1973, in opposition to a referendum which would have permitted 19-year-olds to purchase and consume alcohol in the state of Washington.

Somewhat less certain, and certainly less vigorous, has been the counsel on the subject of "hot drinks." Although early interpreted to refer to coffee and tea, some nineteenth century observers felt that it was the "heat" of the drinks as much as their contents which was the cause for alarm. Thus, one occasionally finds individuals counseling against hot cocoa or hot soup in early sermons or letters. In the twentieth century those who have generalized from the most narrow interpretation have asserted that it is the caffeine and related chemicals in coffee and tea that are the basis for the early advice. The most conspicuous advocate of this notion was Apostle John A. Widtsoe, and largely as a result of his influence there has for several decades been a belief, widely held among Mormons, that caffeine-containing drinks such as colas were implicitly proscribed by the Word of Wisdom. Widtsoe felt that such caffeine-containing items as cocoa and chocolate should be condemned as well, but this further extension has not achieved the same popularity as the movement against colas. None of these generalizations were ever accorded the status of an official endorsement by the First Presidency. The Presidency has, however, advised private inquirers at least since the 1930s that partaking of "decaffeinated" drinks was *not* to be considered in violation of the Word of Wisdom. Such guidance has specifically singled out such "97% caffeine free" products as Sanka coffee as examples of acceptable items. Regarding colas, the Presidency advised Church leaders through the *Priesthood Bulletin* in February 1972:

The Word of Wisdom, section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, remains as to terms and specifications as found in that section. There has been no official interpretation of that Word of Wisdom except that which was given by the Brethren in the very early days of the Church when it was declared that "hot drinks" meant tea and coffee.

With reference to cola drinks, the Church has never officially taken a position on this matter, but the leaders of the Church have advised, and we do now specifically advise, against the use of any drink containing harmful habit-forming drugs under circumstances that would result in acquiring the habit. Any beverage that contains ingredients harmful to the body should be avoided.

Little to no official public attention has been given to other elements of the Word of Wisdom, and the sanctions currently applied to those violating the proscriptions against coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol are not applied to

heavy meat eaters or those otherwise in violation of the "spirit" of the Word of Wisdom. Nor are there sanctions for drinking cola drinks. Regarding the latter point, it is of interest to note that "science" is considerably less sure about the deleterious effects of small amounts of caffeine than they appear to have been in Widtsoe's day. Taken in moderation by people in generally good health, caffeine-containing drinks have yet to be convincingly implicated as a cause of disease. (A better case may yet be made against consuming drinks of high temperature!)

No comprehensive study of Mormon teachings on the Word of Wisdom has been published. Much useful information is contained in Paul H. Peterson, "An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom," unpublished MA Thesis (Brigham Young University, 1972); Leonard J. Arrington, "An Economic Interpretation of the 'Word of Wisdom,'" *BYU Studies* 1:37-49 (Winter 1959); and Thomas G. Alexander's forthcoming study of *The Early Twentieth Century, 1900-1930*, a volume in the projected sesquicentennial Church history.

⁶The Presidency nonetheless has, in recent years, issued endorsements of several vaccination programs. In September 1976 a statement was released on the massive federal program to vaccinate against A-New Jersey (Swine) Influenza. In part, the statement read,

Church members are encouraged to carefully consider the potential benefits and risks of this vaccination to the health of themselves and their families. Special considerations should be given to the protection of those who are ill or convalescent. We encourage Church members to seek competent medical advice with questions they may have. . .

Members of the Church who are technically qualified and who feel so inclined are encouraged to provide what community service they can to assist with this influenza immunization campaign.

Even stronger was a subsequent statement on childhood immunizations:

Reports that increasing numbers of children are not being immunized against preventable childhood diseases deeply concern us. In the United States alone approximately 20 million children, 40 percent of those 14 years old or younger, have not been adequately immunized against polio, measles, German measles (rubella), diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), mumps and tetanus.

Every parent who has agonized when these diseases have maimed or brought premature death to their children would join us, we are certain, in a plea to mobilize against these deadly enemies.

Immunization is such a simple, yet vital, matter and such a small price to pay for protection against these destroying diseases.

We urge members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to protect their own children through immunization. Then they may wish to join other public-spirited citizens in efforts to eradicate ignorance and apathy that have caused the disturbingly low levels of childhood immunization.

Failure to act could subject untold thousands to preventable lifelong physical or mental impairment, including paralysis, blindness, deafness, heart damage, and mental retardation.

Immunization campaigns in the United States and other nations, if successful, will end much needless suffering and erase the potential threat of epidemics. Such efforts are deserving of our full support. (5 May 1978)

A second public health campaign is apparently seen in a somewhat more guarded light. On the question of fluoridating the public water supply by the Utah State Board of Health (a proposition thus far rejected by Utah voters on thirteen occasions), the Presidency advised on 13 May 1972:

Questions are being asked regarding the Church's position on fluoridation of public water supplies to prevent tooth decay. As with other non-moral issues which may be under consideration or be brought before the voter by referendum, we reiterate the advice given by leaders of the church from time to time that it is the duty of every citizen to act in accordance with his or her convictions.

We have not in the past, nor do we now, seek to bring coercion or compulsion upon the church as to their actions. On the contrary, we have urged and do now urge that all citizens study the issue carefully and then act according to their honest convictions.

Those interested in the Utah response to public health problems should consult Joseph R. Morrell, *Utah's Health and You: A History of Utah's Public Health* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956); an interesting recent study is Richard B. Dwore, "A Case Study of the 1976 Referendum in Utah on Fluoridation," *Public Health Reports* 93:73-78 (January-February 1978).

⁷The previous year the First Presidency had advised, through the *Priesthood Bulletin*, February 1973:

A homosexual relationship is viewed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a sin in the same degree as adultery and fornication.

In summarizing the intended destiny of man, the Lord has declared: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." (Moses 1:39.) Eternal life means returning to the Lord's exalted presence and enjoying the privilege of eternal increase. According to his revealed word, the only acceptable sexual relationship occurs within the family between a husband and a wife.

Homosexuality in men and women runs counter to these divine objectives and, therefore, is to be avoided and forsaken. Church members involved to any degree must repent. "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them." (D&C 59:43.) Failure to work closely with one's bishop or stake president in cases involving homosexual behavior will require prompt Church court action.

⁸A supplemental comment on vasectomy was delivered in the 1976 Solemn Assemblies, after a verbatim recitation of the Commissioner's statement. "Vasectomy" was defined at the time as "a surgical excision of the spermatic duct to induce permanent sterility."

We deplore the fact that members of the Church should take such measures to render themselves incapable of further procreation. It is a terrible thing, to say the least, and the more serious the offense the more severe the penalty should be. The question of whether or not a temple recommend should be issued to someone who has had a vasectomy should be determined by the local leaders based upon their consideration of the underlying circumstances and appraisal of whether or not there has been true repentance.