

QUESTIONING THE IMMORALITY OF COFFEE

Sherrae Phelps

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon. Before that, women weren't allowed to enter marathons. There's an iconic photo of Switzer just a few miles into the race when a race official realized that she's a woman. He physically tried to remove her from the course, running after her in his sports jacket, buttoned-up shirt, and slacks, reaching out with his hands to grab her. The photo freezes the look of disgust and determination on his face. People today look at that photo and immediately see the absurdity of banning women from participating in a marathon. But the closer you get to the time period when that photo was taken, the more likely you are to find people who didn't think it was so absurd. It's highly probable that there were men *and* women at the time who were appalled not at the man trying to pull her off the course but at Switzer for running the marathon in the first place. It's not that people today are more enlightened and open-minded, it's simply that people today are so far removed from that cultural and societal norm that its blinding effect has no power over them.

Challenging the social, cultural, and religious norms of your time is far more difficult than challenging the norms of the past. This is in part because the norms of your time are readily accepted as correct, superior, and honorable. Our norms have a way of distorting our ability to accurately judge what is and isn't morally good.

Similarly, defensively sheltering religious practices from scrutiny and criticism limits one's ability to see things as they really are. Making room to listen to and understand scrutiny and criticism does not

contaminate truth—it reveals truth. Even religious views at their best have the possibility of being flawed and imperfect. If we are unwilling to wade into the discomfort of an honest examination of religious ideas, then we are confining ourselves to a limited understanding of truth.

Religious practices can play a significant role in one's moral development, but tragically, they are often used to outwardly measure one's devotion and loyalty to their religious organization rather than to foster moral and spiritual development. Focusing on organizational loyalty corrupts and dilutes the power of the religious practices and diminishes their ability to augment development. When Christ taught that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), he was reminding the people that the role of religious practices is to contribute to one's moral and spiritual development, not to measure one's loyalty to religion. Too often, religions are given diplomatic immunity freeing them from having their practices questioned and evaluated, even by devout practitioners. One of religion's most effective tools to eliminate scrutiny is to identify the scrutinizer as being influenced by the devil.

Looking at the religious practice of abstaining from drinking coffee under a moral microscope can be very distressing and disorienting for someone whose religious norms incorporate the Word of Wisdom. Sometimes our cultural and religious norms have become such an integral part of who we are that closely examining those norms is much like trying to look out a windshield that has become frosted over. It takes some scraping before you can see more clearly, and even then, a residual fog can still obstruct your view. This is not to discredit religious norms and suggest that they all lack goodness. It is simply acknowledging the difficulty in examining our religious norms. In part, it is challenging because it requires that we confront our egos and biases that can skew the truth.

Within the Church, we say that by drinking coffee, you are rebelling against the words of the prophet and therefore against God. If you are

a member of the Church and you choose to drink coffee, then you do not qualify to receive a temple recommend. Are you really going to let a cup of coffee keep you out of the celestial kingdom?¹

But what is it about drinking coffee that makes it so harmful and threatening to our spiritual and moral development? Is drinking coffee immoral? Is it bad? Is it wrong? Is it a sin? Or is it just unacceptable? Can abstaining from coffee contribute to our moral and spiritual development?

The overarching principle of the Word of Wisdom wakes us up to our responsibility to care for our bodies through making wise choices about what we eat and drink, acknowledging that the way we treat our bodies plays a significant role in our emotional and spiritual development. We can get so focused on minute details like coffee that we completely downplay the value that the Word of Wisdom is offering us. Ironically, we might pride ourselves on being vigilant in abstaining from coffee while turning a blind eye to our indulgence with other food and drink, even when that indulgence is having a noticeable negative impact on our health. In my view, the Word of Wisdom isn't about abstaining from coffee, it's about being wise stewards of our bodies.

From my perspective, there isn't anything special about coffee that makes it immoral to drink, but rather it is our relationship with coffee, and with everything we consume, that can make food or drink spiritually destructive. Coffee creates a harmful impact on our emotional and spiritual development in the same way that any food can be harmful when it is used to manage emotions rather than confronting them. Coffee and all other food and drinks that are consumed out of unbridled indulgence will have a negative impact on your health and your emotional well-being.

1. See Julie B. Beck, "Remembering, Repenting, and Changing," Apr. 2007, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2007/04/remembering-repenting-and-changing?lang=eng>.

Today, within the Church, I think that the focus of the Word of Wisdom often misses the mark. Our laser focus on coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol, can distract from a more valuable wisdom of being mindful and taking responsibility for the food and drink you put into your body. Because of this fallible focus, there are an endless number of arguments against the Word of Wisdom. Is it caffeine that makes coffee unacceptable to drink? Then why is it okay to drink caffeinated soda and energy drinks? Are we only supposed to avoid hot drinks, so is iced coffee okay? What about meat? Why can we eat all the meat we want and still get a temple recommend but if we drink one cup of coffee we can't? Why did the Saints get decades to adjust to the revelation before it became a law while today we expect converts to give up those same things overnight? Why was coffee on the packing list for the Saints when they were crossing the plains? Why was it that Brigham Young built and owned a distillery and a saloon? So because I like coffee and not Diet Coke, I can't have a temple recommend?

These are compelling questions, but they don't expose the fallacies of the Word of Wisdom—they expose the fallacy of the way in which we are approaching the Word of Wisdom. There are not a lot of arguments that challenge how the Word of Wisdom encourages individuals to eat and drink in a way that contributes to their health; most of the criticism questions whether coffee is really the best thing to focus on when teaching about good health practices. We often lose sight of the principle of the Word of Wisdom by hyper-focusing on coffee. It's too simplistic to suggest that by not drinking coffee you are keeping your body and mind healthy.

Asking whether drinking coffee is immoral can raise some red flags within the LDS community. Rather than being seen as a valuable question to explore, it is seen as the sign of a doubting heart and weakened faith by whoever dares to ask. As Latter-day Saints, we can be defensively quick to shut down someone trying to come to a greater understanding of truth, morality, and virtue if they at any point

challenge any of the Church's positions. Someone who does not fully align with all the positions of the Church is seen as someone whose hubris is getting in the way of seeing or hearing God's voice through his prophet. They are seen as hard-hearted and stiff-necked. They are seen as someone who is putting themselves above God's prophets. They are seen as someone who is rebellious. Within the LDS community, we claim to invite and encourage natural questions and critical thinking, but our actions often show that we are more comfortable encouraging our members to instead just do what they're told.

Is avoiding coffee about participating in something that the Church says is morally wrong or is it just a practice to test and measure one's willingness to align with the words of the prophet? If abstaining from drinking coffee does not contribute to our moral development, is there a place for it? Is it virtuous to have an arbitrary law or practice that only measures our obedience and loyalty to an organization?

There is value in looking more deeply at our religious practices and our personal relationship with those practices. But what if you evaluate your religious practice and you come to a position that is in conflict with the Church's position on that practice? It will stir up some uncomfortable tension. But this tension creates the kinetic energy that can powerfully contribute to spiritual development. Sometimes *what* you choose is not nearly as important as *why* and *how* you make that choice. There is greater value in aligning our choices and actions with our integrity rather than performing automaton-like compliance.

SHERRAE PHELPS {sherraefp@gmail.com} is a social introvert and a hiking trail runner. Thinks she's funny and generously laughs at all her jokes. Has a BA in education from Weber State University. Has been published in *LDS Living* and often contributes to the *Conversations with Dr. Jennifer* podcast. She is skilled in asking thought-provoking questions. Takes pride in having read the unabridged version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. She and her family live in Utah, a place they genuinely enjoy exploring.