

## **SPIRIT OF THE LAW VS. LETTER OF THE LAW** **The Word of Wisdom**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a long-time Bishop's counselor, I have had many opportunities to teach "Early-Morning Seminary" to the high school students of my ward. I firmly believe that the most effective teaching comes when the student is removed from his comfort zone by challenging fundamental assumptions. I tried to follow that model in a lesson about the "spirit of the law" and the "letter of the law" as they relate to our eating code called "The Word of Wisdom." The following letter was subsequently written to the parents of those students.

### **LETTER**

From: Victor Poulsen  
To: (Parents of Seminary Students)  
Date: Sat, 9 Jan 1999  
Subject: Spirit of the Law vs. Letter of the Law

While teaching a combined Seminary class, I asked eighteen students, ranging in age from 14 to 18, whether a number of food items were "against" the Word of Wisdom. I wrote the items, one at a time, on a chalkboard followed by the amount of caffeine (in milligrams) one serving contains. The students responded anonymously on a sheet of paper--"Y" (against) or "N" (not against). One student abstained ("A") from voting on five items. Three other students wrote "Y" on every item so I concluded that they were not taking it seriously. Their votes are not included in the following summary.

(Y N A)	
(15, 0, 0)	Percolated Coffee (cup) - 110
(15, 0, 0)	Instant Coffee (cup) - 66
(10, 4, 1)	Mountain Dew (can) - 52
(10, 4, 1)	Dr. Pepper (can) - 38
(13, 2, 0)	Iced Tea (can) - 36
(4, 10, 1)	Dark Chocolate (1oz.) - 20
(4, 10, 1)	Cocoa (cup) - 10
(12, 3, 0)	Decaf Coffee (cup) - 2
(5, 9, 1)	Excedrin - 130
(11, 4, 0)	No Doz - 200

It became increasingly difficult, as we moved down the list, for the students to come to a conclusion. (I judged this by the number of moans and groans). The list is astonishing in its own rite. It is taken from a book entitled "The Well Pregnancy Book" by Mike and Nancy Samuels. But I found the students responses equally astonishing.

Rather than give them the answers, as they expected me to do, I launched into a little parable that went something like this:

Think of yourselves as a young child and of me as your parent. Let's say I made a rule that no food is to be eaten in the family room. On day I return home to find food spilled on the family room carpet. It turns out that you were watching a favorite TV show and got hungry. Knowing my rule, you stood in the doorway dividing the kitchen from the family room and the food slipped from your hand. So now I make a new rule. Using masking tape, I create a sort of "No Fly Zone" on the floor around the door and demand, "You may not stand in the 'No Fly Zone' to eat". Again I return home to find food on the floor. It turns out that you had been SITTING in the NFZ. New rule--"You may not eat while making bodily contact with the NFZ." Again I return to find spilled food, this time with a chair in the NFZ. New rule...

I then asked the students what this little exercise reminded them of (besides the NFL rules committee). As I had hoped, one of the students raised his hand and said that it sounded like the Sadducees and Pharisees making rules about how far you can walk on the Sabbath and which kinds of knots may be tied.

This all well introduced the subject I really wanted to teach--Spirit of the Law vs. Letter of the Law. "How much better would it have been for me to simply ask you to keep food off of the floor and let YOU decide how to make it so?," I suggested. "I'm not going to give you the answers to our Word of Wisdom quiz because there aren't correct answers to most of them. You have a mind and a spirit and you know how to use them. Sometimes things aren't spelled out in black and white and you have to make judgments. And if someone judges differently than you, that's ok and you shouldn't be critical of them." I taught that there is a real danger in trying to govern by rules because you can never cover all possibilities.

So what is the "Spirit of the Word of Wisdom?" Take care of your body.

I also pointed out that the Word of Wisdom is fundamentally different than other commandments because it was not given as a commandment. Rather, it was later adopted by the church as such. Therefore we should not look with scorn upon others (non-Mormons) who do not obey a law that was never given to them.

I won't try to interpret the results of our quiz but I thought you might like to see them.

Victor