



11-1-1985

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### Recommended Citation

Hawks, Ricky D. and Buckner, Eugene (1985) "S.A.V.E. . . . More Than a Four-Letter Word," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 11 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol11/iss2/8>

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## S.A.V.E. . . . MORE THAN A FOUR-LETTER WORD

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**RICKY D. HAWKS, M.Ed. and  
EUGENE BUCKNER, Ph.D.**

**Presented at the AMCAP Convention  
4 April 1985**

The use of habit-forming drugs has been identified as a social problem among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). To help combat this problem the Church has, among other things, published a pamphlet titled *The Resource Manual for Helping Families With Alcohol Problems*. After several years of research and correlation, this publication was mailed to stake presidents, bishops, and branch presidents throughout the United States and Canada in May of 1984. The manual is an attempt to help curb the use of alcohol and other habit-forming materials. Substance dependency is viewed as an increasing problem among Church membership. It is well understood by the leadership of the Church that the rate of consumption for church members differs depending on location and circumstances. In some of the developing countries the problem appears to be epidemic in nature, while in Utah and other parts of the West, where the Church is better established and where Church membership represents a majority of the population, the consumption rate is typically below the national average.

The viewpoint of Church doctrine is that any position other than abstinence is unacceptable. Because of this strong stand on abstinence, members of the Mormon Church who use habit-forming or addicting substances, seem to develop some unique personality characteristics. This is clearly illustrated in the case of a twenty-one-year-old male who was feeling a great deal of conflict and who sought help from a well-known alcohol treatment program.

He was told by his therapist at the treatment center to accept the concept that he was suffering from a disease for which he could not be held responsible, yet his value system was telling him that the use of such materials is looked upon by the Lord as a sin.

His struggle was great, even though neither he nor his family had been "active" in his L.D.S. religion for 15 years, or since he was about six years of age. Such a phenomenon is observed in other religious organizations where a prerequisite of abstinence is a condition for full participation. The focus of this paper will be to try to better understand the dilemma faced by the L.D.S. person who is trying to make his way back into the L.D.S. community after having been dependent on mood-altering substances.

### Background

When the Church was first organized, the use of alcohol and other drugs was not identified as being counter to the principles of the gospel. However, with the advent of the Word of Wisdom, the 89th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants, received February 27, 1833, the use of habit-forming substances began to be a point of separation of those in good standing and those not in good standing.

The 89th Section was initially given as a "greeting" and not as a commandment or by constraint, and the use of habit-forming substances was continued for several years after the introduction of the revelation. With further growth of Church doctrine and the development of religious dogma, the solidification of the religious stand against habit-forming materials became progressively more clear for some substances and less clear for others. For most Latter-day Saints and non-members familiar with the Church, it is clearly

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understood that the use of tea, coffee, tobacco, and alcoholic beverages are against Church standards. Although this position is presently clear, it has evolved over time and was not so when initially implemented. Not so clear today is the use of cold drinks containing caffeine, addicting prescription drugs, and other items which some feel are wrong but others accept as appropriate.

That the 89th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants was not initially implemented as a commandment was viewed by some Church leaders as a god-send, since many of the early leaders of the Church were users of such substances and some were perhaps even addicted. As stated by Joseph F. Smith, (*Conference Report*, October, 1913, p. 14)

The reason undoubtedly why the Word of Wisdom was given—as not by ‘commandment’ was that at that time, at least, if it had been given as a commandment it would have brought every man addicted to the use of these noxious things under condemnation; so the Lord was merciful and gave them a chance to overcome, before he brought them under the law.

Taking a stand more in line with today's traditional view, Joseph Smith, in speaking to the “High Council” (Quorum of Twelve Apostles) in 1838, said, “No official member in this church is worthy to hold an office after having the Word of Wisdom properly taught him; and he, the official member, neglecting to comply with and obey it.” (*Teachings of Joseph Smith*, p.117).

The trend for the 89th Section to become a commandment was evidenced when Brigham Young in 1851, after putting the issue of compliance to the membership of a general conference, declared the 89th Section to be a “commandment” rather than merely a “greeting”. Even before abstinence from the substances identified in the 89th Section was identified as a commandment by which to judge the worthiness of Church membership, those who abstained were considered more devout and were trusted to hold responsible positions within the Church. This kind

of compliance seems to have overshadowed the behavioral manifestations of Church dedication that were observed when many were asked to leave all that they had and move to new locations.

It was while moving west that the 89th Section received more emphasis. Many of the brethren were asked to leave their vices outside of Church buildings, or refrain from spitting and chewing. If the use of such materials, while in church, was necessary, the membership was admonished to do so discretely. (*Journal of Discourses* 8:361,362;1961). From this time forward, abstaining from the use of addicting materials became more a measure of one's religiosity and righteousness.

### Research

Current research has found that membership in a church, regardless of denomination, tends to curb one's use of habituating materials. In other words, as church membership and activity go up, the drug use goes down. (Bry, McKeon, and Pandina; 1982). Other studies (Blum and Associates, 1972; Gossett et al., 1972; Streit, 1978) found a significant difference in religiosity between users of addicting substances and non-users. Non-users were much more likely to worship with their families and be active in their churches than were users.

Briscoe, (1966) in a survey of Davis County School District in Utah, found similar supporting data among a predominantly L.D.S. population. In his sample, 60 percent of the non-users attended church regularly, while only 25 percent of the users reported such participation. In a survey conducted by the Utah State Board of Education (1974), most of the students who abstained from stimulants, depressants or hallucinogens did so because of 1) personal beliefs, 2) health concerns, and 3) religious beliefs. When asked specifically about abstaining from alcohol, these same respondents reported their reasons for abstaining were 1) religious beliefs and 2) personal beliefs. This would indicate religious beliefs and values are significant factors in

influencing one's use of alcohol in a predominantly L.D.S. setting.

In a study by Straus and Bacon, (1953), consumption of alcoholic beverages was compared in students from four different religious backgrounds. Included in this study were those professing to be Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon. The incidence of consumption was lowest for the Mormon group. Males used alcohol approximately twice as frequently as females. With respect to the complications their use created in their lives, the Jewish group was lowest and the Mormon group was highest. The author of the study concluded that the "Mormon students stood to lose all respect from their Mormon peers even if they had drunk only socially, whereas other groups paid little or no attention to the social drinking behavior." This would suggest that in most of society drinking is not considered to be much of a problem until one loses control and/or becomes offensive to those around him. In an L.D.S. population even the most minimal consumption is looked upon as requiring rather severe sanctions.

It is suspected by some who have studied the alcohol consumption of various groups that a unique quality develops among L.D.S. users. The assumed uniqueness is that when L.D.S. once begin to drink, a higher percentage of them develop a serious drinking problem compared to the general population where less emphasis is placed on abstinence.

It should be noted that much of the material published or spoken regarding "Mormons" and alcohol usage is based on observation and opinion and that there has been relatively little information generated from well controlled objective research. It should therefore be pointed out that reported consumption patterns may be based more on conjecture than on known fact. A good example of this is a statement made by a well known Catholic priest who speaks frequently regarding the consumption of alcohol, and who has made several references to "Mormons" and their drinking patterns. When asked in a telephone conversation for the source of

his information, his response was something like "well I'm not sure, but it sounded about right." Probably much of the data reported in and out of the Church too often "sounds about right."

### Resources

Since a basic tenet of Mormonism is abstinence from the use of habituating materials, and since simple observation confirms that a quantity of L.D.S. people are addicted to substances that run counter to the above tenet, what resources are available to assist the L.D.S. person in his desire to move from addiction to a life more conducive to good family relationships, sound friends, and inner peace with one's self?

For many new converts to the Gospel, their conversion provides the kind of support that is needed to move into a more peaceful and productive life. However, for those for whom this is not enough, other alternatives must be identified and/or established. Many who have had problems with habituating substances feel too tarnished to go immediately back into the mainstream of the Church, yet they find an emptiness in the offering made by other organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous. They need a place where spirituality, as they understand it, can be discussed and they can know that there is understanding and hope for them. They need to speak with those who understand what is meant when they speak about their personal experience with the Lord or their Father in Heaven. For many who are attempting to make a return, getting back into the mainstream of the Church is like the child standing at a counter in the candy store with his nose against the glass. They can see all of the good things available to them, but it is still too far away for them to enjoy the benefits.

It is difficult for many returning L.D.S. persons trying to return through AA or similar settings, to enter a smoke-filled room, which to him/her still represents going against God's will or to talk about a supreme power that may be referred to as the "group", an "intangible God" or even a chair or table. Latter-day

Saint people have been taught from early childhood that God is real, that He can hear and understand them and is personal, and that He expects them to behave in certain ways if He is approached by them. The coffee-scented, smoke-filled room, with too frequent use of foul, four-letter words, makes it difficult for one trying to make the transition back, just as the bearing of strong testimony condemning misdeeds in a sacrament meeting may impede the return of the errant soul into activity. What is needed to assist these people as they work their way back into a life which holds dignity and acceptance for them is a place where their misbehaviors can be understood, yet where the familiar is truly familiar and accepting.

In November of 1983, a new program was introduced in Weber County, Utah, by a group of people who were interested in helping those who had become chemically dependent to bridge that gap which had kept them from enjoying congruence between their values and their behaviors. This new program took advantage of an existing program but built on it for those who needed something along more traditional L.D.S. lines. The name of the program was Substance Abuse Volunteer Effort Incorporated. This became shortened to S.A.V.E. Inc. With permission from Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon, the twelve steps and twelve traditions were modified to meet the needs of this part of the L.D.S. population. The basic concept was retained, but the "higher power" became Jesus Christ, and rather than merely working for sobriety, the aim of S.A.V.E. was also to return those who attended back into Church activity and participation. Programs were provided for both the adult and the youthful user and families were included. An educational offering was added to the program to round it out.

Although not endorsed by the L.D.S. Church, those who have been working with S.A.V.E. have worked closely with the leadership of the Church to make it compatible and effective with Church values and concepts. Even though the program

was designed for the person with an L.D.S. orientation to God, values, and life in general, it is not limited to just L.D.S. people. Anyone who desires to participate is welcome to do so.

In contrast to the typical AA meeting, there is no smoking or coffee. In a S.A.V.E. meeting, participants are invited to speak of their God as a personal God and testimony can be borne if appropriate. Those interested in forming chapters are invited to do so under the guidelines established by the Central governing body, which includes priesthood representation.

The following services are provided by S.A.V.E. Inc.:

1. *Outreach*: S.A.V.E. provides educational seminars and speakers for L.D.S. groups on a variety of drug and alcohol related topics.

2. *Family Intervention*: S.A.V.E.'s family intervention services are adopted from the Alcohol Intervention manual of the L.D.S. Church and are developed to assist those surrounding the substance abuser.

3. *Support Groups*: S.A.V.E. has received permission from AA and Al-Anon to adapt the twelve steps and twelve traditions to an L.D.S. perspective. Support groups include S.A.V.E. Families, S.A.V.E. Abusers, S.A.V.E. Teens, and S.A.V.E. Youth.

4. *Educational Resource Center*: S.A.V.E. has developed a list of materials appropriate for use by L.D.S. people concerning habituating substances. These materials are available at minimal costs.

If a S.A.V.E. Chapter would be helpful for those you serve, more information can be obtained by contacting:

S.A.V.E.

2568 Washington Blvd.

Ogden, Utah 84401 or by calling (801) 621-7283

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