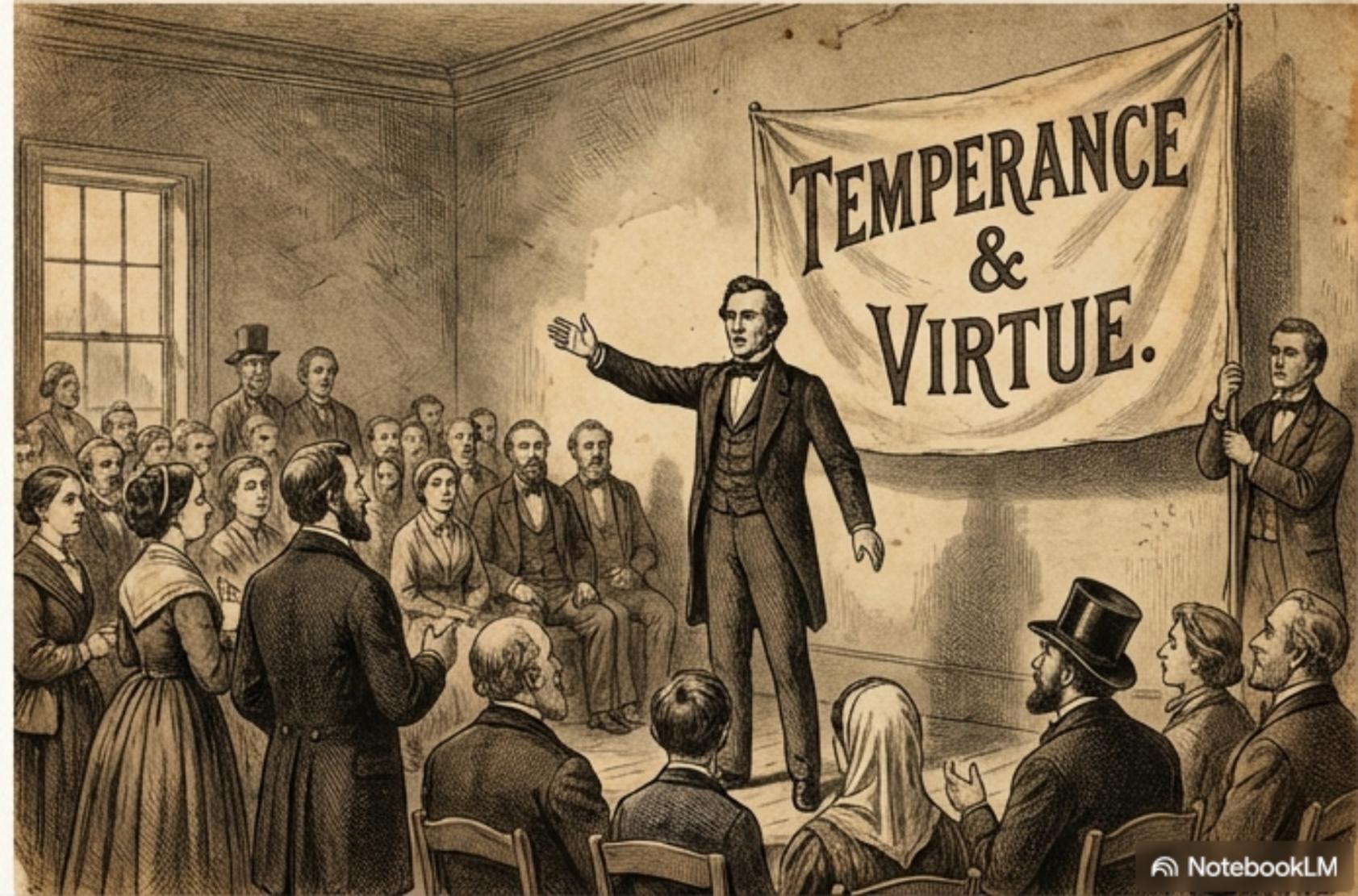




# The Word of Wisdom: Revelation or 19th- Century Health Fad?

An evidence-based look at the history, evolution,  
and modern application of Mormonism's health code.



# The Official Story: A Divine Health Code

According to the Church, in 1833, Joseph Smith received the Word of Wisdom directly from God. It is presented as a prophetic revelation that:



- Warns against alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea.



- Foreshadows future substance abuse from “conspiring men.”



- Promises unique health benefits and spiritual blessings to the obedient.



# A Revelation Pulled from the Air... or the Headlines?

## The Claim

The Word of Wisdom was a unique, groundbreaking revelation, demonstrating Joseph's prophetic insight into health long before modern science.

## The Evidence

The revelation mirrored the popular American Temperance Movement of the 1820s-30s. Every major point was already in public discourse:



**Sylvester Graham:**  
Popular lecturer against alcohol, smoking, tea, and coffee in the late 1820s.

Means of  
**Preserving  
Health**  
1806

**Journal of Health**

1830

**Kirtland  
Temperance Society**  
- Founded 1830

# The Real Catalyst: Tobacco Spit and a “Counter Dig”

Historical accounts suggest the revelation was a reactive solution to a domestic problem, not a proactive health directive.



**Emma Smith's Complaint:**  
Joseph's wife, Emma, was tasked with cleaning the tobacco mess from the School of the Prophets. She lamented, "it would be a good thing if a revelation could be had declaring the use of tobacco sin."



*National Day  
of Temperance.*

*D&C 89  
Revealed.*

“He recalled the matter was “joked about,” and one of the brethren suggested the revelation should also forbid tea and coffee as a “counter dig at the sisters.”

– David Whitmer

This discussion took place immediately following a “**national day of temperance**” on February 26, 1833. Joseph produced the revelation the very next day.

# Prophets Practiced What They Preached... Except When They Didn't

## The Claim

Joseph Smith and early leaders set an example of obedience, abstaining from the substances forbidden in the Word of Wisdom.

## The Evidence

Records show early leaders, including Joseph, regularly consumed alcohol after 1833.

**"We then partook of some refreshments and our hearts were made glad with the fruit of the vine."**

- History of the Church (1836)

**"I believe we all drank of the wine and gave some to one or two of the prison guards."**

- John Taylor (on the day of the martyrdom, 1844)

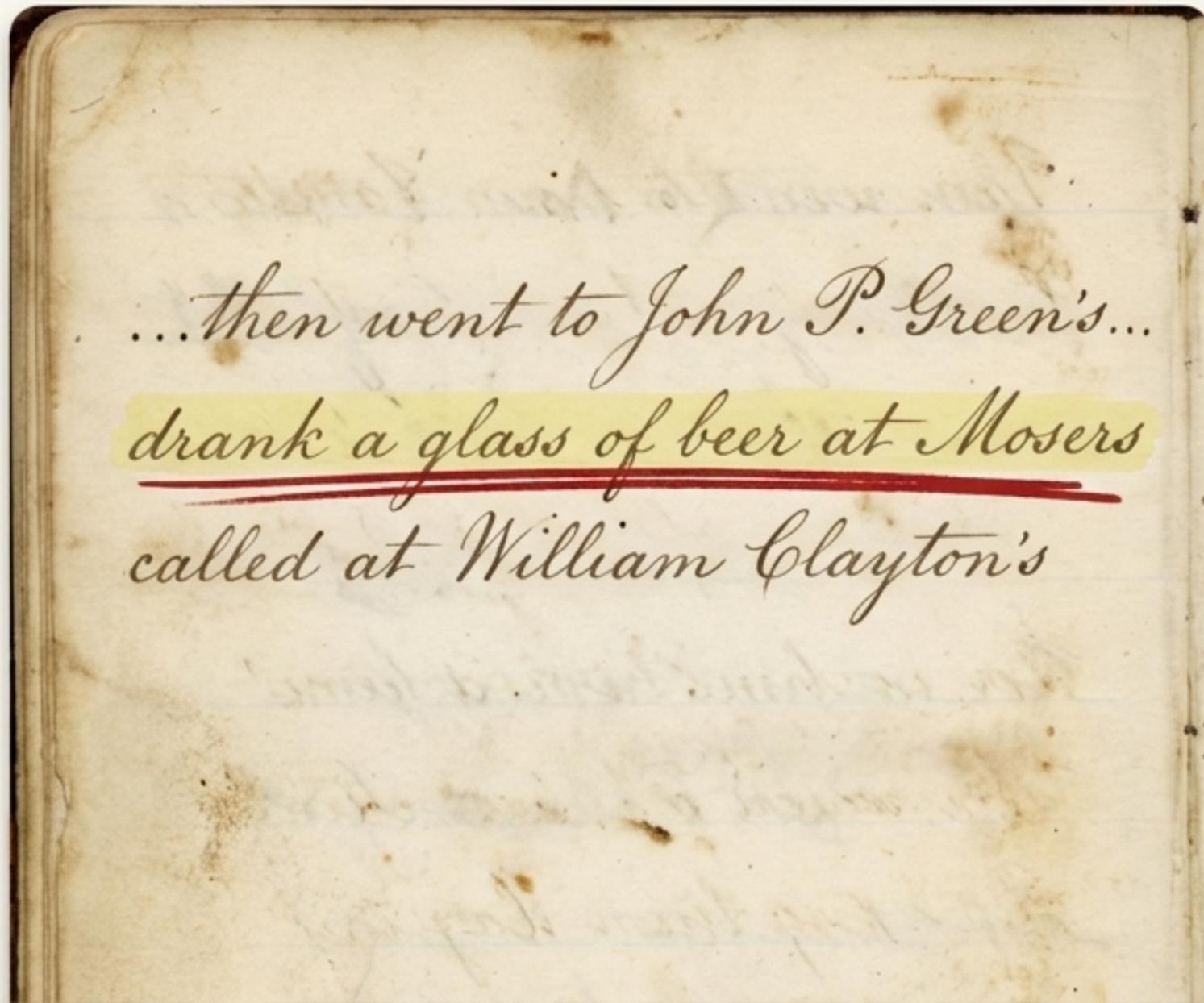


Brigham Young owned and profited from the Salt Lake City Distillery.

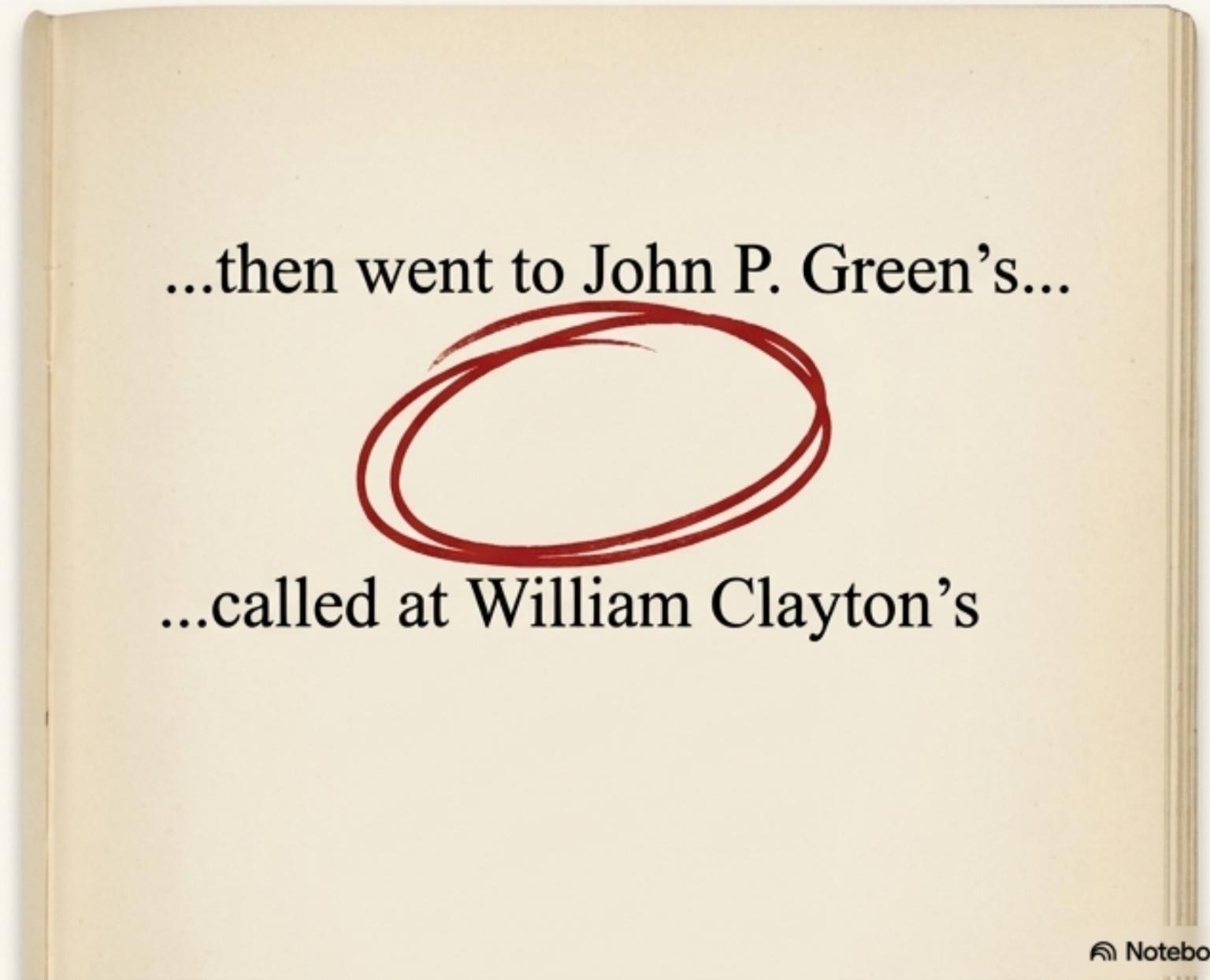
# Rewriting History: The Case of the Disappearing Beer

In 1902, as the Church began to emphasize the Word of Wisdom, Joseph Smith's own journal was altered to hide his non-compliance.

**Source:** Joseph Smith's Personal Journal, June 1, 1844



**Source:** *History of the Church*, 1902 Edition



# Reading the Fine Print: What the Revelation Actually Says



## Hot Drinks

“Hot drinks are not for the body or belly.”

**Then:** A common 1830s belief that overly hot liquids (including soup) were harmful.

**Now:** Interpreted as only coffee and tea, yet bans *iced* coffee and tea while allowing hot chocolate and hot soup.



## Mild Drinks

“...barley for all useful animals, and for mild drinks...”

**Then:** Barley’s primary use was for beer, which was seen as a “mild drink” versus “strong drinks” (hard liquor).

**Now:** All alcohol is banned.



## Meat

“Meat... to be used... only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.”

**Then:** A clear dietary restriction.

**Now:** Largely ignored in modern Mormon culture.



## Herbs

“All wholesome herbs God hath ordained...”

**Then:** An endorsement of natural plants.

**Now:** Raises questions about substances like cannabis, which is explicitly an herb.

# The Prophetic Blind Spot: What God Forgot to Mention

A truly divine health code would contain knowledge beyond its time. The Word of Wisdom does not.

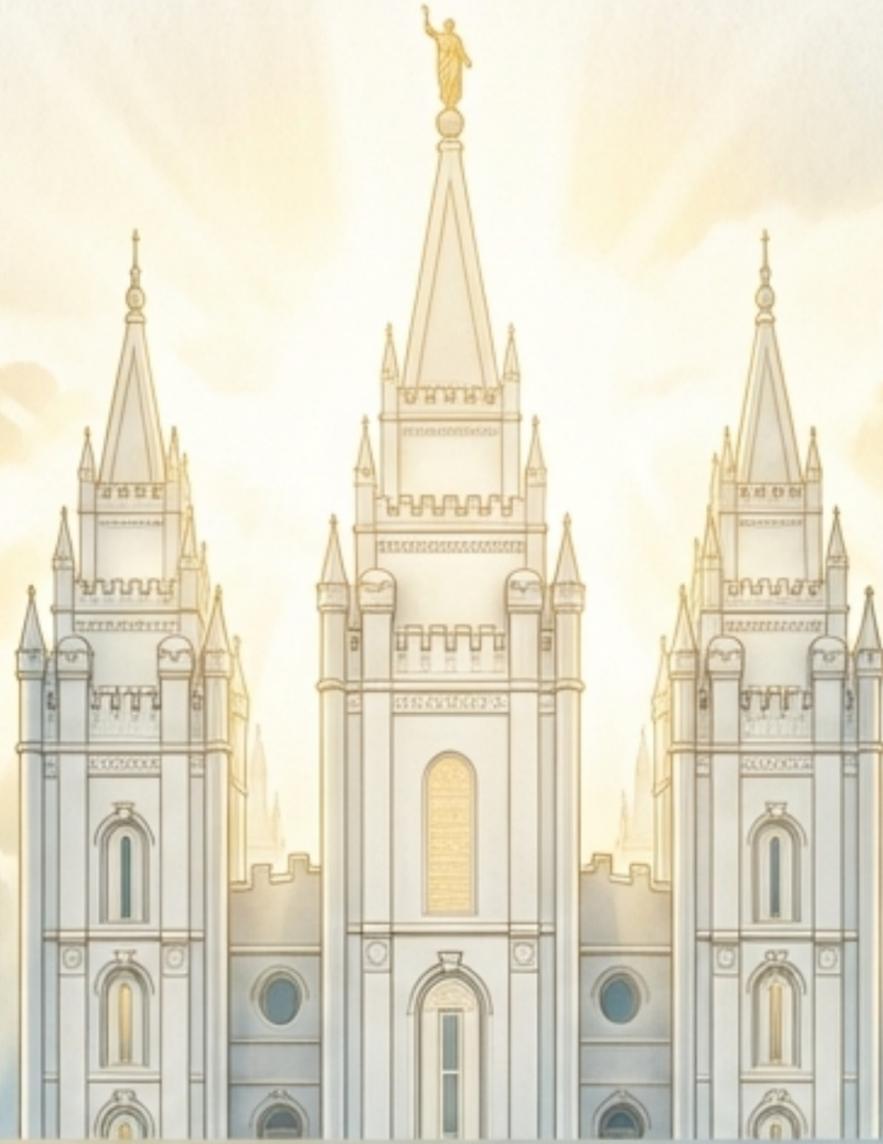


## Case Study: The 1834 Cholera Outbreak

Just one year after the revelation, a cholera outbreak sickened over 60 members of Zion's Camp and killed more than a dozen. The cause was contaminated water.

**A single, simple instruction—“Boil your water”—was unknown to 1830s science but would have been known to God. This life-saving information is absent.**

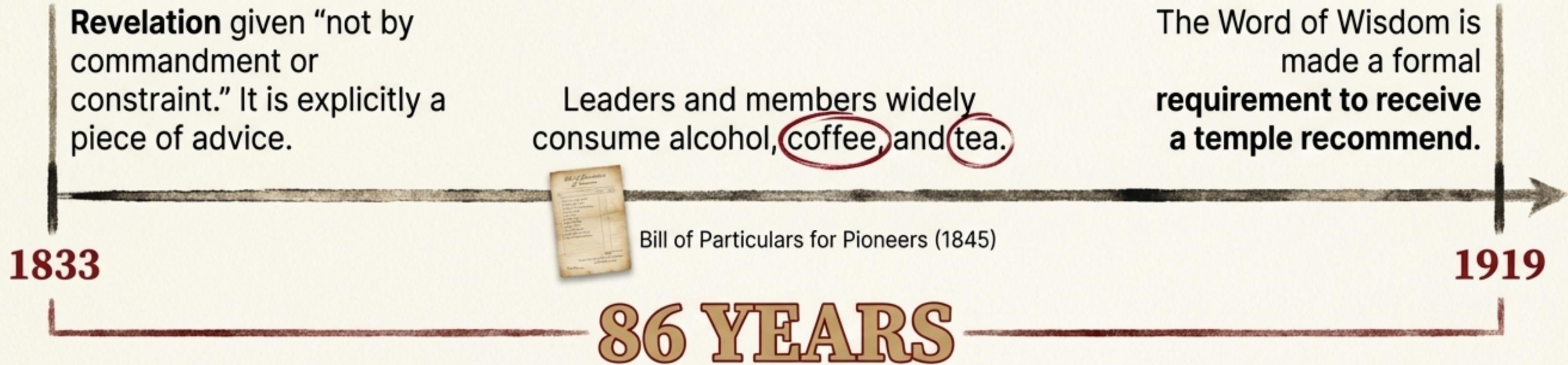
**Takeaway:** The revelation's content is perfectly bounded by the knowledge available to a man in the 1830s.



# **The Unchanging Commandment?**

The Claim: The Word of Wisdom has always been a fundamental requirement for faithfulness, temple worship, and salvation in the Church.

# From Suggestion to Temple Test: An 86-Year Evolution



## Critique

**Apologetic Argument:** “Members needed time to adapt.”

**Counterpoint:** 86 years is multiple generations. Anyone addicted in 1833 would have long since passed away.

# Why the Change in 1919?

The elevation of the Word of Wisdom to a commandment was not random. It coincided with two major external and internal pressures:

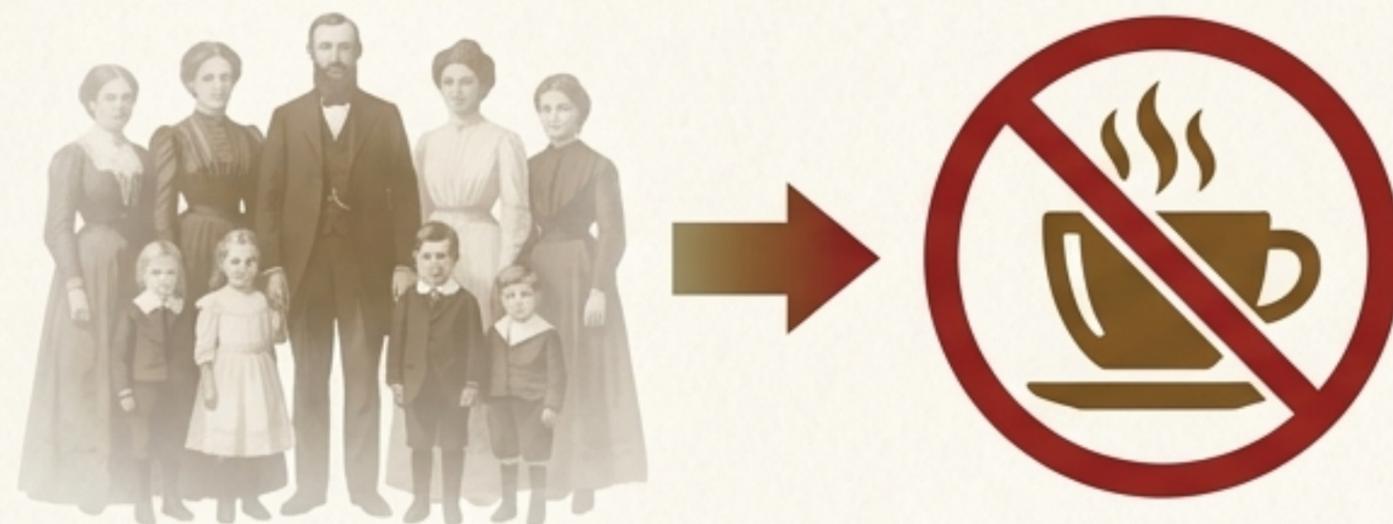
## 1. The Rise of Prohibition

The 18th Amendment was ratified in January 1919, establishing national prohibition. The Church's policy change in October 1919 aligned it with this powerful national movement, making it seem prescient.



## 2. The Search for a New Identity

After officially ending polygamy (1890/1904), the Church lost its most distinct practice. The Word of Wisdom provided a new, visible "identity marker" to set members apart and create a unique cultural boundary.



# The Modern Purpose: A Law of Obedience

Today, the Word of Wisdom functions less as a health code and more as a test of loyalty and a tool for behavior control. The inconsistencies (e.g., banning healthy tea but allowing unhealthy soda) are irrelevant when obedience is the primary goal.

The fundamental purpose of the word of wisdom has to do with revelation... someone under the influence can hardly listen to Plain Talk... as valuable as the word of wisdom is as a law of Health, it may be much more valuable to you spiritually than it is physically.

*- Boyd K. Packer, Apostle*

# The Generational Cost of a Cup of Coffee

This principle of obedience is enforced through powerful emotional appeals that link minor choices to eternal consequences for one's entire family.



A Story from General Conference  
(Julie B. Beck):

She claimed that ‘the Lord will not keep me out of heaven for a little cup of coffee.’ But because of that little cup of coffee, she could not qualify for a temple recommend... **only one of her ten children had a worthy Temple marriage, and a great number of her posterity... live outside of the blessings of the restored gospel.**”

# Vilifying the World: 'Conspiring Men with Evil Designs'

The Church's own materials often use cartoonish imagery that frames non-adherence as a sign of moral failing, reinforcing a sense of superiority among members and suspicion of outsiders.

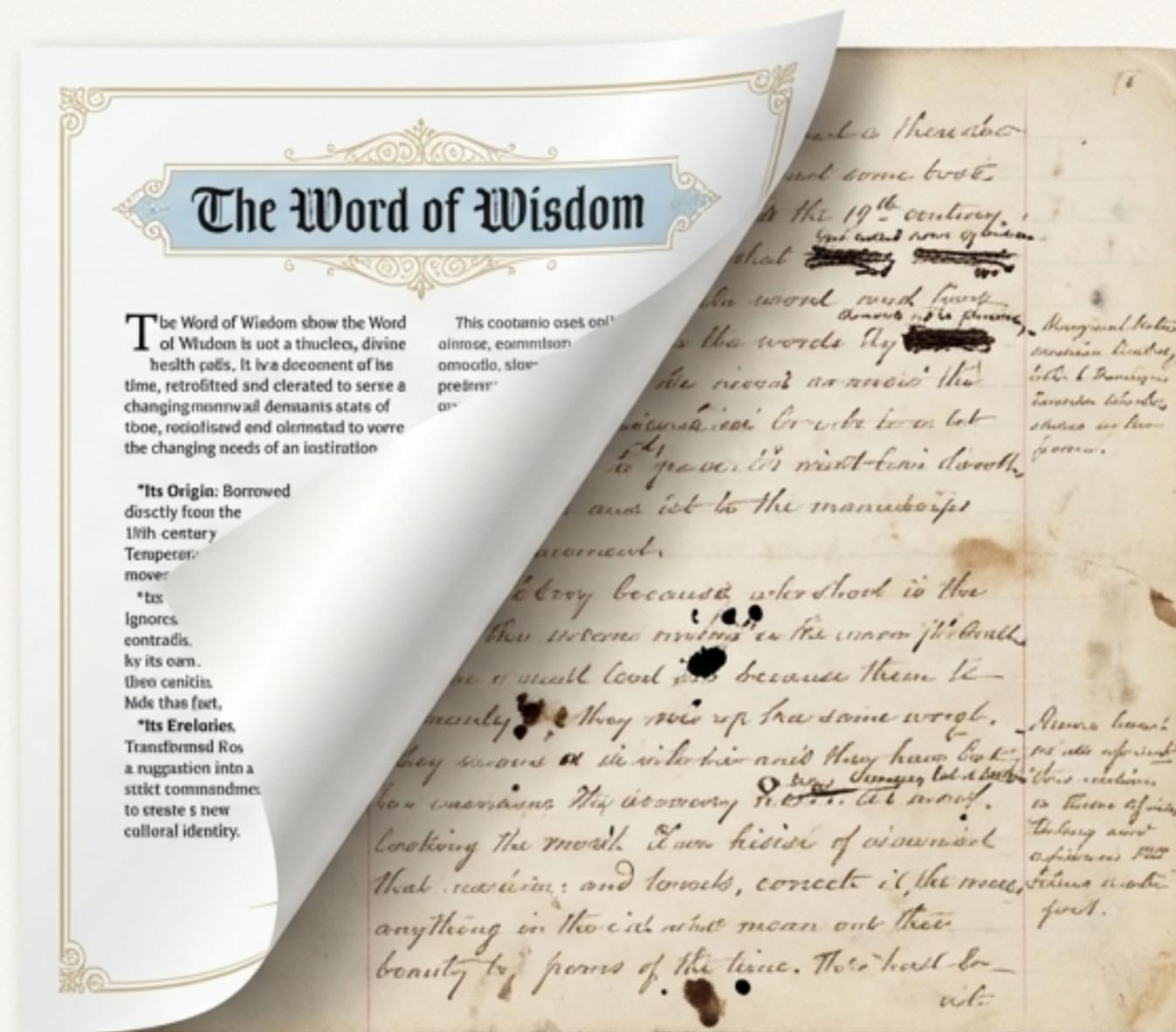


This is how the 99%+ of the world that does not follow the Word of Wisdom is often portrayed—as wicked and scheming, rather than simply making different choices.

# A Man-Made Doctrine

The historical record shows the Word of Wisdom is not a timeless, divine health code. It is a document of its time, retrofitted and elevated to serve the changing needs of an institution.

- **Its Origin:** Borrowed directly from the 19th-century Temperance movement.
- **Its History:** Ignored and contradicted by its own author, then sanitized to hide that fact.
- **Its Evolution:** Transformed from a suggestion into a strict commandment to create a new cultural identity.



**The story of the Word of Wisdom reveals a consistent pattern: when history and doctrine conflict, it is often history that is redefined.**