

Preserving and Promoting Agency

D. TODD CHRISTOFFERSON

President Worthen, President Reese, members of the university administration, faculty, staff, admired honorary-degree recipient Reverend Dr. Teal, graduates, family members, and friends, I am pleased to greet you on behalf of the officers and members of the board of trustees and with my wife, Kathy, to join you on this happy occasion. I am also pleased to be here with Elder Clark G. Gilbert, our commissioner of education, and Elder Matthew S. Holland, himself a former university president and close friend and colleague of Reverend Dr. Andrew Teal.

President and Sister Worthen, I speak for all of us in expressing deep gratitude to you for your service at the head of this university that we love. Recognizing that this is the final commencement ceremony Kevin will direct here, we look back over the last nine years and honor you today for what your leadership has meant. We are grateful for the exemplary model the two of you have been for the students of BYU and for the manner in which

you have represented BYU to the rest of the world. You have spoken in myriad devotionals and other settings, participated in and supported uncounted student activities, and hosted a steady stream of guests, including many national and international dignitaries—all with grace and warmth.

Among other things, President Worthen has been singularly focused on the BYU mission statement in all aspects of his administration. He has established the Inspiring Learning initiative, providing thousands—tens of thousands—of students with a mentored research experience plus expanded internship, study abroad, and experiential learning programs. And he has worked to elevate BYU athletics—most recently navigating our entrance into the Big 12 Athletic Conference. President Worthen has presided over major building and infrastructure improvements that will benefit us for a long time to come. During most of this time, in addition to fulfilling his extensive responsibilities at BYU, President Worthen has

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also served as a commissioner with the accreditation body of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and, importantly, as an Area Seventy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Kevin and Peggy, you have made us proud, and we wish you Godspeed and the Lord's continuing blessings in the endeavors of the future.

To our dear friend and honoree, Reverend Dr. Teal, may I express sincerest congratulations and my personal good pleasure in witnessing the honorary doctorate being conferred upon you today. Your life has been devoted to the well-being and happiness of others, particularly those least favored with the necessities and comforts of life. You have sought and cultivated understanding, goodwill, and collaboration among Christian communities and beyond. You have worked to build faith and promote freedom of religion and belief at home and abroad. In short, yours is a life well lived, and your association with Brigham Young University adds a certain brightness to the reputation and stature of our school. We have sought to honor you, but you conspicuously honor us by your character and contributions. It is also our honor to be joined today by your dear Rachel, Chiara, and Luke. Thank you.

To the degree recipients that we recognize today and tomorrow, I add my congratulations and best wishes to the many others you have received and will yet receive.

Among the precious revelations granted to the Prophet Joseph Smith was a more complete account of God's designs in the creation of this earth and our mortal experience. It includes this important bit of knowledge: that in the premortal realm, "Satan rebelled against [God], and sought to destroy the agency of man."¹ Later in the book of Moses, God confirms to the prophet Enoch that humankind "are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency."²

Lehi explained that God "hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon,"³ and that we are in the category of things created to act.⁴

Elsewhere in the scriptures, this divine gift is referred to as "moral agency."⁵ This is in the context of the Lord explaining that He had

suffered to be established [the laws and constitution of the people] . . . for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles;

*That every man [might] act . . . according to the moral agency which [God has] given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment.*⁶

These verses help us understand that our agency—our ability to choose and to act for ourselves rather than simply being acted upon by forces beyond our control—has a moral dimension. When we choose in the light of and in harmony with moral truths, we reap redemption, peace, joy, and eventually eternal life. To act guided by contrary principles leads us in the opposite direction, as occurred, for example, again in the premortal world. As God recounted:

*The devil . . . rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency.*⁷

So agency when used in a manner consistent with moral truths looks like a blessing, while agency when used in a manner that rejects moral truths looks like a curse. But in the end, God has no other option for nurturing His children toward becoming as He is. Can you imagine a God who has not mastered accountability? Actually there were such supposed gods—in the imaginations of ancient Greek, Roman, and other pagan societies. These fictitious gods were vengeful, capricious, and altogether unreliable. I say no thanks; I will take the true and living God and the responsibility of accountability.⁸

You, the graduates we honor today, have come of age at a time when agency and accountability are, to say the least, underappreciated. I suppose there have always been individuals and groups lusting for power who have used force and terror in attempts to subjugate others and drastically reduce the exercise of individual moral agency.

The year I was born was the year World War II ended—a victory for freedom and moral agency. Unfortunately, the intervening seventy-eight years have brought many often devastating efforts at despotic enslavement, and they seem to be increasing in number.

Of particular concern are (1) trends and philosophies that deny the reality of individual moral agency and (2) societal conditions that disable the effective exercise of individual agency. You are familiar with voices that would classify entire races as hapless victims on the one hand or irredeemable oppressors on the other. They reject the possibility of individual choice and action—for them, people are only acted upon. At the same time, we cannot deny that many grow up in chaotic homes, broken communities, non-functional schools, and circumstances that make it all but impossible to get hold of the tools needed to exercise moral agency wisely and to make good choices.⁹

My plea to you today is that in the years ahead you will work hard to preserve and wisely exercise your own moral agency and will work equally hard to preserve and provide that same blessing of moral agency to others. Let us all be agents rather than objects.

To be an agent will require you to continually study the gospel of Jesus Christ, wherein are found those essential truths that enable the intelligent use of moral agency. The more fully you and I grasp gospel principles and truths, the greater our motivation will be to incorporate them into our character and the better our choices can be. As the Lord Himself said to His disciples, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”¹⁰

Preserving and sustaining the moral agency of others can flow from the various ways you contribute to your communities and countries in the future, especially as you act to lift and empower the disadvantaged. May I also recommend that you promote in every appropriate way President Dallin H. Oaks’s teachings in his address “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution” as they relate to upholding moral agency.¹¹ Finally, regarding your influence in the secular world, I cite the Lord’s statement:

When the wicked rule the people mourn.

Wherefore, honest men [and women] and wise men [and women] should be sought for diligently, and good men [and women] and wise men [and women] ye should observe to uphold.¹²

Some of you will, I trust, be those honest, good, and wise men and women who we can look to in years ahead for the kind of political leadership at all levels that preserves moral agency and accountability.

Most importantly, however, it will be what you do at home that will matter most:

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. . . .

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.¹³

I testify that our precious agency originates with God, our Father. In the gift of His Son, He has redeemed mankind from the Fall, and we

have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon. . . .

Wherefore, [we] are free according to the flesh; and all things are given [us] which are expedient unto man. And [we] are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men.¹⁴

As King Benjamin affirmed, “Under this head [and no other] ye are made free.”¹⁵ Never forget that it is because of Jesus Christ and His Atonement that we can act to choose God and His righteousness. Praise be to Him, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moses 4:3.
2. Moses 7:32.
3. 2 Nephi 2:14.
4. See 2 Nephi 2:16.

5. Doctrine and Covenants 101:78.
6. Doctrine and Covenants 101:77–78; emphasis added. See also verse 80.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 29:36.
8. For an extended commentary on the doctrine of moral agency, see David A. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine: Spiritual Patterns for Turning from Self to the Savior* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 36–63.
9. For an able exposition of these issues, see Ian V. Rowe, *Agency: The Four Point Plan (F.R.E.E.) for All Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power* (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2022).
10. John 8:32.
11. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” *Liahona*, May 2021.
12. Doctrine and Covenants 98:9–10.
13. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
14. 2 Nephi 2:26–27.
15. Mosiah 5:8.