

Agency: A Gift with Responsibility

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Agency, the power we have to work out our salvation through choosing between good and evil, is the eternal principle that will be the focus of the time I share with you today. Agency is a divine birthright. Bruce R. McConkie encapsulated the doctrinal perspective of agency in these words:

*Inherent in the whole system of salvation that grows out of the fall of man; inherent in the great and eternal plan that makes of this life a preparatory and a probationary state; inherent in the very atoning sacrifice of God himself—inherent in the whole eternal plan of salvation is the eternal law of agency. All of the terms and conditions of the Lord's eternal plan operate because man has his agency, and none of it would have efficacy, virtue, or force if there were no agency. [Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1985), p. 89]*

Throughout all dispensations of time, the gift of agency has been given to all of our Heavenly Father's children with the capacity to think and to reason. Each one of his children has also been given the Light of Christ to guide in the personal exercise of the gift of agency.

This is true whether or not the gospel has been on the earth in its fullness.

President David O. McKay reminded us, "Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God's greatest gift to man" (*GI*, p. 299). It is a gift with significant personal responsibility. This responsibility was emphasized by Wilford Woodruff in this statement: "By virtue of this agency you and I and all mankind are made responsible beings, responsible for the course we pursue, the lives we live, the deeds we do" (Wilford Woodruff, *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* [Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1946], pp. 8–9).

We, as spirit children of our Father in Heaven, had the opportunity to choose in the premortal existence because we possessed agency. One of the choices we made was the selection of the plan that was to govern the earth and its people: the plan of Satan *without* agency or the plan of Jesus Christ *with* agency. We chose the plan with agency—a plan which required that *we* must direct our own lives. The framework for the operation of agency was

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declared before we made the choice. We knew what we were choosing, and, thereby, we accepted responsibility for the decisions we make and the actions we undertake. Our Heavenly Father holds each of us accountable.

John A. Widtsoe wrote:

Since the law of free agency is ever uppermost in the plan of salvation, the Lord who gave the law must respect it, even though He weep at the errors of His children. It would be a violation of His own plan, should He step in. [John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arr. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960, 1987), p. 217]

Our Heavenly Father conforms to the terms and conditions that govern agency and the plan of salvation.

I have a deep testimony that our *responsibility* for our agency is as sure as is the *gift* of our agency. We cannot change the terms and conditions that govern the principle. We made the decision to accept it, and now we must live by it. It is much like the decision made by those of us who are blessed to be members of the Brigham Young University community, whether we are students, staff, faculty, or administration. When we chose to join this community, if we were and are honest and forthright, we also acknowledged then, and must continue to do so now, that we made the decision to commit ourselves to the Honor Code. We made a covenant in each case—accepting the gift of agency and signing the Honor Code. Our decision was made with terms and conditions established, and it is not our option to demand changes simply because we would prefer to walk or talk or to act in ways that do not conform to the principles, patterns, and practices we knew or should have known before we made the covenants.

President Kimball said:

Every soul must stand trial and pay the uttermost farthing in one way or another. Escape from the consequences of acts of free agency is an impossibility. No one, however clever, bypasses the “due reward of our deeds.” There are dark, deep corners, locked rooms, isolated spots, but no act, good or bad; no thought, ugly or beautiful, ever escapes being seen or heard. Every one will make the imprint on the individual and be recorded, to be met and paid for. Hence, one only deceives himself to think he is “getting by” with anything improper. [TSWK, p. 155]

Probably all of you already understand these principles of agency and their significance in our lives, so why have I chosen to discuss this topic? The choice was made because I was impressed that I should share some of the lessons that have been intensified for me through observation, teaching, and working with others; lessons that have provided new insights, deeper understandings, intense joy, and sorrow; lessons that have enriched my life because I accepted the position as director of the Honor Code Office—a position that I did not aspire to and did not seek, but a position that came to me through a quiet, gentle, noncoercive invitation to serve. This is often the way our Heavenly Father presents opportunities and challenges to us. As I pondered the invitation, I came to know that the invitation should be accepted. I, therefore, exercised my agency to respond to what I accepted as a call. This response, over which many of my friends and acquaintances have shaken their heads in disbelief, was a response that has and will affect my life eternally.

Specifically, my experience as director of the Honor Code Office has enhanced my awareness not only of the critical nature of our exercise of agency, but also of the contrasting, sometimes conflicting, conceptions regarding the application of agency in individual lives. The insights that I will share center around three—sometimes distinct and sometimes

overlapping—conceptions regarding agency. These are multidimensional conceptions that can be examined from different viewpoints. They are conceptions that I frequently encounter in my work, in the media, and in personal interactions with others.

The first conception has to do with control: *Who* is in charge of the terms and conditions under which agency operates? The second conception relates to timing: At what point should sensitivity to the importance of choices and decision become an issue in one's life? The third conception deals with *what* is one free to choose, to think, and to do? In other words, what aspects of daily life does agency affect or what is the nature of the choices for which one is responsible?

Let's begin with an examination of some of the differing viewpoints that focus on the conception of *control*. One viewpoint suggests that agency, including the terms and conditions upon which it operates, belongs to the individual, and, therefore, the individual is free to take any action or to think any thoughts so long as they are chosen and the choices feel okay to the individual making the decisions. Individuals of this persuasion respond warmly to the doctrine of Korihor that "every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). They also like Nehor's message "that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear" (Alma 1:4). Thus, everyone is *okay* just as they are and will be saved in the kingdom—if there is a kingdom—so not to worry.

These individuals tend to see man, especially themselves, as having great wisdom and sometimes suggest that surely this is the basis upon which man was given agency in the first place. Therefore, whatever thoughts are espoused and whatever actions are embraced are fine because they have been chosen.

The kinds of messages that have accompanied the expression of this viewpoint regarding control in the exercise of agency include "I am the boss of what, when, where, and how I will do things. After all, through the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith I have come to know that I am to be taught correct principles and then allowed to govern myself. Don't you understand that I am free to do whatever I choose?" Somehow the anticipation, as these words are expressed, is that the consummation of such choices, having been freely made, assures one that there are no consequences emanating from them. Curiously, these thoughts are often articulated when it is evident that the principles are probably not understood. In addition, the personal certainty of those who champion this viewpoint regarding control of the exercise of agency ensures that they are unlikely to see or will not see or accept the messages before them. Self-justification becomes seductive, and rationalization alluring and provocative.

A contrasting viewpoint related to the conception of control in the exercise of agency is based on the perception that personal responsibility must be assumed because a covenant was made when the gift was accepted. Individuals who embrace this conviction understand their responsibility for exercising their agency and are sensitive about the need to make changes and adjustments in their lives. These individuals echo Nephi's words, "Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin? May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite!" (2 Nephi 4:31–32). Their appreciation of the gift of agency is deep, and they understand its relationship to repentance. This level of commitment is expressed in words such as "I am grateful for the lessons I have learned from the errors I have made because they have given me insight about repentance—an insight that has been followed by my application of the principle. The process has not been easy. In

fact, it has been very exacting, but I know, as never before, that the Savior loves me and that he trusts me to grow through experience and by the exercise of my agency.”

The second agency-related conception, *timing*, is an issue that we each encounter frequently in our own and in the lives of others. Basically, disparate viewpoints center on *when* an individual thinks they ought to get serious about the choices and decisions that are made.

Some of the expressed viewpoints about timing as they affect agency include “Anything I do is okay until I am baptized” or “Having entered the kingdom through baptism, the Atonement takes care of all sins—so everything is splendid. What’s the big deal? Why push me now?”

Or you may have heard, as I have, “When I am ready, I will take care of *it* (whatever their *it* is), so please just leave me alone. Don’t bug me. The Atonement has made amends for sin already. The Savior understands me. He knows my weaknesses, and his help will be available to me when I am ready. I just need to repent, and I will do it when I am ready and not a minute sooner.” I find the arrogance of this position heartbreaking—heartbreaking for the individual making the statement as well as heartbreaking for me. There is no sense of the depth of pain and anguish that was experienced in Gethsemane, no sense of the agony that accompanied the Savior’s willing sacrifice, no sense of awareness that we each personally contributed to that agony, no expression of humility or gratitude that our Elder Brother cared so much that he gave his all for each of us—a sacrifice that only he could make.

The thought that some could say to themselves, let alone to others, “I will do as I please and then accept the offering when it is expedient for me” is almost inconceivable.

Another viewpoint related to the conception of timing is that expressed by those who do not desire, who sometimes even refuse, to make decisions now or in the foreseeable

future. These are they who become so consumed by the responsibility to righteously exercise their agency that they fear doing anything. They are like the recipient of the “one talent” who hid it in the ground so it would not be lost. They ask, “Is it okay if I . . . ?” or “What should I do?” or “Why won’t you just tell me what to do?” They want direction in all things at all times. Responsibility is too much for them.

Then there are those whose viewpoint of the exercise of agency encompasses both the *costs* embodied in the Atonement and the personal responsibility that comes with having accepted the gift. These individuals often acknowledge that they regret the mistakes, miscalculations, misinterpretations, and misconceptions that have led to sin in their lives. However, their experiences have also taught them to follow the counsel given by Alma to his son Corianton: “Let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29). They become more sensitive to the early warning signs of things that might cause them to stray into strange byways, and they relish the lessons that prompt them to cling more tightly to the iron rod and stay on the straight and narrow path.

Viewpoints related to “who has control of the terms and conditions that give us the framework for exercise of agency” and related to “the point at which one ought to become concerned about one’s choices and decisions” often interface with the third conception: *Free to do what?* Viewpoints about “free to do what?” frequently produce a dichotomy. Choices are seen as (1) those things that one ought not to do and (2) those things that one ought to do. Sometimes the ought-to-dos are also seen as things that one ought to do but would rather not do.

Some hold that agency is only exercised when one is approaching or is on the doorstep of imprudence, impropriety, immorality, or

some other thought or action cleverly presented by Satan. For those thus engaged, movement from the path of righteousness is usually an easy step-by-step process—here a little, there a little. Movement toward wrongdoing unfolds over time and seldom is a sudden leap into major misdeeds.

Contrary to the position of those who hold the view that agency is only exercised when choosing to do what one ought not to do, the exercise of agency is not unidirectional. President Brigham Young taught:

Does it follow that a man is deprived of his rights, because he lists in his heart to do the will of God? . . . I can manifest to the heavens and to the inhabitants of the earth that I am freeborn, and have my liberty before God, angels and men, when I kneel down to pray, certainly as much as if I were to go out and swear. . . . I believe that this course proves that I am a free agent, as much as if I were to steal, swear, lie, and get drunk. [DBY, p. 65]

Agency is ours. Choices and decisions are ours. We are responsible for them. Let us, therefore, choose wisely. In the time that remains, let us look together at some of the fundamental options that continually require our exercise of agency.

May we willingly choose *obedience over disobedience* and *compliance over resistance*? Obedience requires, in the words of Elder McConkie, that “we voluntarily choose good rather than evil, light in preference to darkness, Deity’s way in preference to the devil’s, [otherwise] it is philosophically impossible to be saved” (McConkie, *A New Witness*, p. 683).

Having signed the Honor Code, thus covenanting to abide by it, a student may ask, “What difference does it make if my appearance doesn’t meet the Dress and Grooming Standards? After all, it’s what’s inside that counts. You do not know the real me, and if you’d relax and get to know me, you’d realize that I am okay, that I do have good and

appropriate intentions.” However, deliberate disregard of the Dress and Grooming Standards is a visible sign of disobedience, and it does indeed speak to what’s inside, but the message likely differs from what the individual perceives. The arguments used to cover the choice to do other than complying with the commitment that has been made are irrelevant.

Another example of deliberate behaviors that reflect disobedience and that frequently comes to the attention of the Honor Code Office has to do with the Residential Living Standards. Parenthetically, we are apprehensive that an increase in such reports may be experienced because teenage, coed slumber parties are in vogue in the world, and, in fact, are the hot topic on talk shows this week. Sometimes as Latter-day Saints we follow the world’s patterns rather than firmly establishing and maintaining our own.

There are individuals who declare that those who support the Residential Living Standards—expecting that young men and young women not go into each other’s private living spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms as opposed to public areas like living rooms and kitchens)—are residing in the Dark Ages and need to get up to the decade of the nineties. A letter from a former student reflects the folly of attempting to explain away Residential Living Standards. The letter read, “I thought that the rules regarding Residential Living Standards were the most ridiculous rules that ever existed. After all, I reasoned, you should have been able to discern that nothing inappropriate was either intended or going on. After all, we only went into the bedroom to study together, to read the scriptures, and to pray. I am sorry to have to report that I came to know that the rules were not ridiculous. They were to protect us, and they were founded on principles. The reasons are clear to me now, and I want to apologize for my disregard of them. Should my children ever have the privilege of becoming students at BYU, rest assured that they will be

instructed by their parents before they leave home that Residential Living Standards matter.”

Other approaches to rationalizing misbehavior—*choosing disobedience over obedience*—are reflected in such conversations as “Yes, I do know what is right and what I ought to do, but I was helping a friend” or “I need to know what it is like so that I can understand what my brother or sister who has a problem is going through. Besides, I know my strengths. I am sufficiently strong that I will not be bothered by the experience, and I will not go too far.” Or a more succinct statement of some, “The Devil made me do it,” which when translated means “It was all my roommate’s fault. If she or he had not introduced the idea, nothing would have happened.” Little do they recognize that the devil or a roommate only has power to “make us do it” if we give permission, which we may have been doing one small piece at a time until we have become hard in our hearts and blind in our minds (see 3 Nephi 2:1).

Another set of choices has to do with *selecting integrity over duplicity* and *virtue over vice*. Our word should be as good as our bond. President Kimball taught that “one might be full of wit and humor; one might be dexterous in performance, but if he has not honor and integrity, he has little or nothing” (TSWK, p. 388). We must decide our direction. We must determine who it is that we would like to become. As President Benson said:

Most individuals do not intend to be dishonest, dishonorable, or immoral. They seem to allow their characters to erode by a series of rationalizations, lies, and compromises. Then when grave temptation presents itself, they haven’t the strength of character to do what they know to be right. [TETB, p. 367]

Cheating, defrauding, flattering, and deceiving do not establish a basis of trust for family life, friendship, or career. The student

who, in the midst of egregious violation of Church standards and Honor Code expectations, tells himself, “Don’t think about being a BYU student, a temple-attending returned missionary who is employed by the Church, because if you do you will not be able to savor this moment, you will have to stop what you are now doing,” is absorbed in deeply deceptive behavior that cheats and defrauds self more than others. A total lack of sensitivity to the absence of personal integrity and the integrity of the institutions affected by the action seems clear.

On the other hand, a student who has violated Church and Honor Code standards, who accepts responsibility for what has been done, who is remorseful, who confesses the violation, and who takes every step within the range of possibility to make amends, now says, “I wish that every student could have experienced what I have experienced because the experience has blessed my life. We all take the gospel, our membership in the Church, our student status, and the Honor Code too lightly. But it is better to not have to learn this the hard way. I will do everything in my power to help others avoid doing what I have done.” This student has vigorously affirmed the desire to make integrity a central feature of daily living.

We ought also to consider the personal strength that ensues from *choosing righteous limits over license, leeway, and laxity*. In fact, we ought to give consideration to going beyond basic obedience to creating and setting limits for ourselves that enhance our reach for salvation. The limits we personally set should go beyond what we think is required. They should be limits that enhance our commitment and conformity to eternal truths. The outcome of reaching beyond the mark may be a fundamental pattern that relates to the high expectations for those who are part of the Brigham Young University family—expectations that in some specific dimensions are higher than those for Church members in general; expectations that,

if met, will prepare us more fully for responsibility in the kingdom; expectations that are an assurance that the education and discipline of the spirit are critical dimensions of a BYU education.

The counsel to extend ourselves beyond basic duty came as the Savior responded to the apostles, as recorded in Luke, when they desired to know what they could do to increase their faith. Jesus said:

When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. [Luke 17:10]

Related to setting limits is the discipline that comes from *choosing industry over misdirected industry, idleness, and sloth*. The Book of Mormon is replete with examples of the results of industry and developing talents and the consequences of idleness, which is consistently followed by the appearance of depravity.

Daily we are presented with opportunities to make the effort to accomplish what is needful or to try to cover our deficiency by deception. Explanations we hear regarding the justification for academic dishonesty are frequently linked to lack of or misdirection of industry. Frequently, for example, it seems that attention to friends, leisure, personal interests, and addictions to television programs or computer games are more critical than studies and require so much time that there is no time left for preparation. We hear, "I am exhausted because we never get to bed before two or three in the morning. I don't have the energy or time to go to class and to study. I have to have my sleep or I will get sick." Perhaps they *are* in a sense experiencing a sickness—but one that is not evident to them—and surely this is one of a different nature than a sickness resulting from a lack of sleep.

I will ever be grateful for parents who not only assisted each of their children in the

development of useful skills and talents but also provided us with the opportunity to experience the rewards and satisfaction of working hard and sharing the process with others.

Another test with which we are faced is the *choice of selflessness over selfishness*. These are choices that are central to our eternal salvation because they encompass the rendering of service. Sometimes we see selfishness as only connected to material things. The more acute test between selflessness and selfishness, however, is reflected in demands for self-gratification. Contrast, for example, those who see only their own desires to exert power over another or see only satisfaction of their own physical needs as a primary goal with those who are sensitive to others' needs and are willing to extend themselves to meet the needs. Those who see others' needs may at times see the needs more clearly than the individuals who have the needs.

Another significant set of choices for which we will be accountable grows out of repeated counsel from the prophets regarding the establishment of homes. The implications of choosing home over *whatever else catches our fancy* are touched on in some way in every general conference. President Joseph F. Smith indicated, for example:

There is no substitute for the home. Its foundation is as ancient as the world, and its mission has been ordained of God from the earliest of times. From Abraham sprang two ancient races represented in Isaac and Ishmael. The one built stable homes, and prized its land as a divine inheritance. The other became children of the desert, and as restless as its ever-shifting sands upon which their tents were pitched. . . . The home then is more than a habitation, it is an institution which stands for stability and love in individuals as well as in nations. [GD, p. 300]

As you make choices, give attention to the possibility that many of us may not be living in homes today but rather in houses,

condominiums, or apartments. These may be mere spaces that provide no more than “wandering grounds” for a nomadic family system; spaces that only provide a place to graze and occasionally to rest; spaces where people come and go at their own paces and leisure without reference to others; spaces where family work that creates ties that bind has been eliminated to the greatest extent possible. The elimination of family work has also limited the opportunity to learn about integrity through contributing to and receiving from others. Shared work and shared responsibility produce an awareness of the consequences of the exercise of agency.

Living spaces as opposed to homes have the potential of creating a modern-day nomadic culture with weak roots. The counsel of the prophets that “no other success can compensate for failure in the home” (David O. McKay, *CR*, April 1964, p. 5) and “Remember always that the most important of the Lord’s work you and I will ever do will be within the walls of our own homes” (Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1975], pp. 255–56) should receive primary attention in our exercise of agency. The distractions to home are many and colorfully presented. The decisions that must be made related to home and family are far too critical to be left to whatever time is left over. Exercise of our agency should assure that home as it encompasses family will be a top priority, requiring commitment of our most serious thought and consistent effort.

In conclusion, a student told me recently, “I have come to know that my exercise of agency has influence that extends beyond myself. I have become aware of ways in which my choices and my interactions affect others—ways that I would never have dreamed would make a difference.” The student echoed President McKay’s instruction that

there is another responsibility correlated and even coexistent with free agency, which is too infrequently

emphasized, and that is the effect not only of a person’s actions but also of his thoughts upon others. Man radiates what he is, and that radiation affects to a greater or lesser degree every person who comes within that radiation. [GI, p. 302; CR, April 1950, p. 34]

Please recognize that our influence can be quiet and subtle. We may be unaware that the choices we make—the things we do and say—are even noted by those around us. Still, we are responsible, whether we deliberately set about to influence others or whether it happens without our forethought or our awareness. Our agency is reflected in the hundreds of small decisions made each day—the choices made in each interaction, whatever the context, influence in small or significant ways. The power of the subtle exercise of agency on you personally, or on others, might be seen by taking a short walk here on campus. Go down the sidewalk on the west side of the McKay Building past the Brimhall Building toward the Maeser Building and look carefully at the sidewalk—you will discover some sections where it appears that soon after the cement was poured leaves dropped from the trees onto the wet surface. Now the weight of a leaf is not great, but it was sufficient at that point to leave an impression in the concrete for all to see. The influence of your choices need not be ponderous or be widely advertised. The gentle impressions—whether the warmth and assurance that come through choices that lead to salvation or those that quietly dissuade from paths of righteousness—carry the message. Just as the leaves left their impression long after the leaves were no more, your choices will influence even after you are no more.

May we each be blessed with a deeper appreciation of the significance of our gift of agency: a gift with responsibility, a gift that is the foundation of our soul’s progress toward salvation. May we know that our daily exercise of agency has eternal reverberations. May we

understand that we have both control and responsibility within the terms and conditions of the gift we have been given. May we know that *now is the time* to take seriously and give attention to the choices we make. May we know by the witness of the Spirit that the

greatest reflection of the exercise of our agency is found when—against all odds, against all pressure, persuasion, and enticement—we still choose the right. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.