

# Accountable Citizenship

STAN A. TAYLOR

I am honored and humbled by this invitation. I pray for the Lord's blessings that I may convey well to you the message I have and that you might receive it in the spirit by which it was prepared. I have titled these remarks "Accountable Citizenship," a topic discussed in section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the section about which I want to talk to you today. But I want to introduce you to that section with some preliminary thoughts, starting with some thoughts about agency.

## Agency

Beyond life itself, agency is God's greatest gift to his children. In the absence of agency, we could not progress toward our ultimate potential. A world without agency would be a prison from whose bars we could never escape. This principle of agency is so important that the most significant war in human or divine history was waged over it and, indeed, continues today. Satan led those forces that would limit agency and progress, and he who would become our Savior led those forces supporting agency and the potential to become more like our Father.

This helps us understand the LDS distaste for totalitarian or even authoritarian governments. Such political systems may achieve

order, but it is an order without justice, without creativity and initiative, and without the opportunity to err—a community in which none could be proven and none could progress.

This also helps us understand the LDS commitment to political freedom, to the rule of law, and to what is generally called liberal democratic government—governments created and maintained by popular sovereignty. Such governments are champions of "individual and minority rights, personal freedom, and religious pluralism" (Gary C. Bryner, "Politics: Political Teachings," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 3 [New York: Macmillan, 1992], p. 1104). These governments adopt laws to ensure

*the rights and protection of all . . . ;*

*That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, 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. [D&C 101:77–78]*

Much of this commitment is explained in what I believe to be the most inspired and

---

*Stan A. Taylor was a BYU professor of political science when this devotional address was given on 5 May 1998.*

accurate statement about government ever written. This statement is described in its preface as “a declaration of belief regarding governments and laws in general.” We know it as section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>1</sup> J. Reuben Clark, Jr., former counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, has said that these statements “are wise and as far-reaching as the Articles of Faith themselves” (*CR*, April 1935, p. 90).<sup>2</sup>

### Dual Sovereignty

Section 134, along with the twelfth article of faith, addresses one of the oldest dilemmas of Christian intellectual history—the dilemma of dual sovereignty. Sovereignty means ultimate or supreme authority, and a sovereign is one who exercises supreme authority.

Some Christians have grappled with the implications of this concept for centuries. How could one owe ultimate allegiance to both God and king? How could both God and king be sovereign? As President Howard W. Hunter once said, “At first blush dual sovereignty would seem inconsistent” (*CR*, April 1968, p. 64).<sup>3</sup>

The standard scriptural basis of this dilemma is found in Matthew 22. In an attempt to entrap the Savior, the Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, “Is it lawful to give tribute [meaning tax] unto Caesar, or not?”

The question, really, was whether or not a Jew—one who considered God his only sovereign—could in good conscience pay tax to the Romans. It was a question of sovereignty: to whom did they owe their loyalty and would the payment of tax violate allegiance to God? If the Savior had said, “Yes, pay the tax,” he would have betrayed his cause. If he had said, “No, don’t pay the tax,” he would have betrayed the government.

The Savior, aware of their hypocrisy, asked first for a coin and then asked whose image appeared on the coin. When they replied, “Caesar’s,” the Savior said simply, “Render

therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:15–22; see also Howard W. Hunter, *CR*, April 1968, pp. 64–65).

Matthew reports that the Pharisees “marvelled . . . and went their way” (verse 22). I suspect another interpretation might be that they went away from him still puzzled about the dilemma of dual sovereignty, not understanding the implications of the Savior’s use of the coin. The coin, as President Hunter has reminded us, “denotes that temporal things belong to the temporal sovereign,” and the image of the current Caesar on it was to be contrasted with the “image of God stamped on the heart and soul of a man [which] denotes that all [of one’s] faculties and powers belong to God and should be employed in his service” (*CR*, April 1968, p. 65). In effect, the Savior told them that the things of the world are subject to worldly authority, but eternal things are subject only to God. But, consistent with pharisaical behavior through all ages, those Pharisees wanted the lines drawn more clearly—they wanted to know precisely what was Caesar’s and what was God’s.

Many Christian intellectuals have struggled ever since to understand the full implications of dual sovereignty and to understand what must be rendered to Caesar and what must be rendered to God.

### Section 134

So this morning I want to read and comment on a few of the themes found in this sacred “declaration of belief regarding governments and laws” that we know as section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The teachings contained therein make clear what must be rendered to Caesar and what must be rendered to God. Verse 1 begins, “We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man.” What a simple, yet bold, opening to this declaration. Keep in mind that this declaration was adopted by the Church “after the

mobblings, the plunderings, [and] the assassinations” that were a part of the Church’s early experience in Missouri. This statement was written by “a people, who, judged by human standards, had every reason to feel that their government had failed, and that they might not hopefully and successfully look thereto for their protection” (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *CR*, April 1935, p. 90).

This opening declaration lays to rest the deceit of both ancient and modern anarchists that government is evil. Listen to a few phrases taken from a book that has been and continues to be very popular among some Latter-day Saints: “Government is . . . evil. And we do not mean . . . that they (governments) are merely dishonest. For all governments . . . are thoroughly dishonest. . . . Government is always and inevitably an enemy of individual freedom” (*The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* [Belmont, Massachusetts: The John Birch Society, 1961], pp. 102–3). Does this sound like something God would institute “for the benefit of man”? I believe that a properly constituted and well-administered government is, in fact, the first friend of freedom.

And notice that this verse does not talk about any particular government. It talks about governments. Joseph Smith said:

*All regularly organized and well established governments have certain laws by which . . . the innocent are protected and the guilty punished. . . .*

*[God] has taught man that law is necessary in order to govern. . . . [Since] God is the source [of] all good; and . . . man is benefited by law, then certainly, law is good. [Teachings, pp. 49, 55]*

Now this is not an endorsement of any and all governments. Nor is it an endorsement of any particular policy or practice of the American government. I have worked for several years in both the Senate and the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., and I can criticize many aspects of government as well as

anyone. But government is not a necessary evil; it is, in fact, a necessary good.

Why would the Lord institute government among his children when government has the potential of becoming dictatorial and of limiting human freedom? This question is answered in verse 6 of this section: “As without [government and its laws] peace and harmony would be supplanted by anarchy and terror.”

### **Limitations on Agency**

There are two conditions under which the earthly kingdom of God cannot exist comfortably. The first is under anarchy, where individuals are so concerned with physical survival that they cannot devote time and attention to more eternal concerns. And notice that the Book of Mormon appropriately links anarchy with terror. The condition of anarchy and the terror of living one’s daily life under anarchy are well described in the Book of Mormon in Ether 14:1–2:

*And now there began to be a great curse upon all the land because of the iniquity of the people, in which, if a man should lay his tool or his sword upon . . . the place whither he would keep it, behold, upon the morrow, he could not find it, so great was the curse upon the land.*

*Wherefore every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and would not borrow neither would he lend; and every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defence of his property and his own life and of his wives and children.*

The second condition is dictatorship, where all or some religious practice is banned. As Elder Bruce D. Porter has reminded us, anarchy and dictatorship are related:

*As is often the case in history, absolute dictatorship was made possible not by the steady growth of government into a leviathan of power, but rather by the destruction of government, which left a vacuum*

*into which ruthless men could move.* [“The Virtue of Government,” address to the Pi Sigma Alpha Society of Brigham Young University, April 1996, p. 2]

Both anarchy and dictatorship thwart God’s plan, since both deny agency. Both anarchy and dictatorship create a society advocated and described by Korihor in the Book of Mormon. It would be, according to Korihor, a society in which

*every man fared in . . . 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]

Section 134 requires us to respect government and work for the establishment of well-ordered and well-administered governments to avoid the evil consequences of anarchy and terror. Government is the opposite of anarchy. It was instituted by God to prevent that kind of society from existing. It is an exalted and ennobling principle. And for this divine gift that was instituted for the benefit of man, what does the Lord expect of us in return?

### **Accountability**

First, he expects us to be accountable for this gift. Listen to the continuation of verse 1: “We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he [God] holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them.”

God holds us accountable for our acts in relation to our governments. I take this to mean two things. First, as verse 1 goes on to say, we are accountable both for “making laws” and for “administering them, for the good and safety of society.” In commenting on this accountability, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., said:

*Therefore, every man who takes on a responsibility by virtue of assuming office in worldly government, is responsible to the Lord . . . for the way in which he carries it out. . . .*

*. . . Whether a [person] takes office in the legislature, or in the executive branch of government, or in the judicial branch, he becomes, by virtue of that assumption of office, responsible to the Lord himself.* [CR, April 1935, p. 91]

What a different nation this would be if every public official understood this obligation.

But accountable citizenship may also require more. It may require a willingness to participate in the political process. It is increasingly difficult to persuade good men and women to run for public office. Public officials are so widely disliked and so much ill is spoken of them that many are unwilling to spend money and time only to earn disrespect. I remember many years ago when I ran for the state legislature, my mother, of all people, cautioned me against doing so by asking if I really wanted to become a corrupt politician.

### **Citizen Participation**

Our late university president Rex E. Lee reminded us that we need to look at the phrase “render unto Caesar” more closely.

*Citizen participation is the fuel that keeps the fires of democracy burning. It is also the single characteristic that best distinguishes republican forms of government from autocracy or dictatorships. The latter not only do not depend on participation by the people, they suppress it. And it also follows, I submit, that a creeping indifference among our citizens concerning the importance of their involvement in matters governmental can lead to a deterioration of democracy itself, and of the freedoms that it secures.* [Rex E. Lee, commencement address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, April 27, 1995, p. 1; emphasis added]

In this regard we need to follow the admonition of section 98, where we are reminded to seek diligently and uphold honest and wise men and women for public office, because “when the wicked rule the people mourn” and “whatsoever is less than these cometh of evil” (D&C 98:9–10).

I hope we all remember the wonderful admonition to this end from the First Presidency letter of January 15, 1998. Among other things, the letter said:

*Thus, we strongly urge men and women to be willing to serve on school boards, city and county councils and commissions, state legislatures, and other high offices of either election or appointment, including involvement in the political party of their choice.*

#### **Civic Officers**

Another aspect of accountable citizenship is spelled out more clearly in verse 6:

*We believe that every man should be honored in his station, rulers and magistrates as such, being placed for the protection of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty; and that to the laws all men show respect and deference.*

Verse 3 touches on this same theme:

*We believe that all governments necessarily require civil officers and magistrates to enforce the laws of the same; and that such as will administer the law in equity and justice should be sought for and upheld.*

This second aspect of accountable citizenship suggests that we should honor and uphold office holders and even (dare I say the word) bureaucrats and the laws they create, administer, and enforce.

I know that in today’s world, this requires a near Christlike charity of judgment. But could I quote at length from a great man who, unfortu-

nately, we largely recall only for a building on this campus that bears his name—Stephen L Richards. President Richards was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and a longtime counselor to President David O. McKay. Writing during the heat of World War II, President Richards said that he was concerned over

*the tendency to indulge in . . . “long-range” criticism of public officials, especially as regards their private life and character. I include within the group not only political officers, but all others who, by reason of their elevation to positions of leadership, assume a responsibility for the direction of movements and causes. I recognize, of course, that the policies of a man in public place and the wisdom of his actions and statements are legitimate subjects for public debate and that proper criticism of such matters is not only allowable, but is to be encouraged in the interests of good government and civic procedure. But is it necessary in such an analysis of issues to bring imputations against a man’s character, his intentions, and his honor? I think it is not, and I believe that inestimable and unnecessary damage is done to personal reputations, sensitive feelings, and legitimate family pride by the misconceived and cruel strategy that the way to win an ideological victory is to assassinate the character of an opponent. . . .*

*I think that those who occupy positions of public trust and responsibility in state, church, or businesses are entitled to a measure of sympathy in the discharge of their obligations. It certainly is not easy to please everybody, and the enforcement of the best and soundest policies invariably affects someone adversely. Because a person is affected adversely is no justification for an attack on the personal character of the enforcing or policymaking officer.*

*So until we can stop calling men “crooks” [or, I might add, any other pejorative name] just because they disagree with us, we have much to repent of. . . .*

*[We ought] to yield obedience to this divine injunction of the Savior, to refrain from intemperate*

*judgment, to impute good rather than evil to the intentions of men, and to investigate and know the facts before deciding. We are much too prone to judge men by the mistakes they make, forgetting that we ourselves are constantly making mistakes. We seldom know or consider their intentions and that they themselves suffer most for their mistakes, in both disappointment and consequence. Most people need our sympathy, rather than our censure, in their failures.* [Stephen L Richards, *The Church in War and Peace* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1943), pp. 168–70]

I apologize for such a long quotation, but this call for charity in judgment is more necessary today than it was in 1943. And this exhortation is especially significant to me since I have seen several individuals and families ruined by irresponsible and false accusations of wrongdoing.

#### **Deference to the Law**

I have talked about honoring and sustaining those who create and administer the law, but what about showing respect and deference to the law itself? According to verse 5, “We believe that all men are bound to sustain and uphold the respective governments in which they reside.” The twelfth article of faith states: “We believe . . . in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (Articles of Faith 1:12). Again, the Doctrine and Covenants contains supporting material on this topic. Section 58 states: “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land” (verse 21).

It makes no difference how we feel about a law. We should obey, honor, and sustain all laws. Whether it be the law that requires us to pay taxes, to serve in the military, to sit on juries, or whatever, we are told that “when we violate the laws of the land, we violate the law of God” (George F. Richards, CR, October 1922, p. 83).<sup>4</sup> If we disagree with the laws of the land,

we should work to change them. According to Joseph Smith:

*It is our duty to concentrate all our influence to make popular that which is sound and good, and unpopular that which is unsound. 'Tis right, politically, for a man who has influence to use it.* [HC 5:286]

But this effort must be done appropriately. Our modern prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, said:

*The building of public sentiment begins with a few earnest voices. I am not one to advocate shouting defiantly or shaking fists and issuing threats in the faces of legislators. But I am one who believes that we should earnestly and sincerely and positively express our convictions to those given the heavy responsibility of making and enforcing our laws.* [CR, October 1975, p. 58]

#### **Loss of Social Capital**

Quite often disregard for law and government stems from self-elevation—from believing that one’s own desires are greater than community needs and goals. Historically, this perversion comes about as the noble goals of the Enlightenment—personal agency and individual rights—are taken to an extreme. Elder Bruce D. Porter described this condition well:

*The whims and lusts of the individual become paramount, and man becomes his own god, a law unto himself. This is a perverted vision of freedom as the elimination of all laws, all restraints, and all government. Those who adopt it seek, as the Doctrine and Covenants says, to become “a law unto [themselves]” (D&C 88:35).* [Porter, “The Virtue of Government,” p. 12]

Being part of a community or society requires respect for others and a willingness to restrain one’s own desires to support broader community goals and aspirations.

Unwillingness to make this sacrifice results in a corrosion of shared values. Members of a community in which individualism and personal goals are pursued at the expense of community goals are driven to look out for their own self-interests, knowing that no one else will look out for those interests for them, to paraphrase the French philosopher Rousseau. Rousseau wrote critically of the anarchy created by the unrestrained pursuit of self-interests. In such a society or community, the public good is gradually driven out by individual goals, and, eventually, the very nature of the community is changed. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has commented:

*Our whole system depends upon what has been called "obedience to the unenforceable," in which citizens willingly constrain themselves for the good of the whole because of shared respect. Once selfishness, which is an apostate form of individualism, reigns supreme, there cannot be a real sense of community. When shared respect dissolves, so does shared power. [Neal A. Maxwell, "The Constitution: The Wisest Ever Yet Presented to Men," devotional address at Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho, September 15, 1987, reprinted by the BYU College of General Education and Honors, p. 20]*

The secular scholars whose work I like most on this topic are Francis Fukayama of George Mason University and Robert Putnam, professor of government at Harvard. Putnam has documented the decline of what he calls social capital, civic engagement, or civic trust. In his provocative article "Bowling Alone, Revisited," Putnam traces the more than quarter-century decline in a wide variety of civic organizations, including (obviously) bowling leagues, and laments the community decline associated with these trends (see Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone, Revisited," *The Responsive Community* [spring 1995]:18–33).

The impact of unbridled self-interest on a community is imperceptible but inexorable. Many times its effects can be seen only when it is too late. Social scientists speak about the "problem of the commons," referring to early New England, where town commons were created on which community members could graze specified numbers of their cows. However, as the community increased, cow ownership increased, and individual owners assumed that certainly their own one additional cow would not damage the commons. The individual assumption was correct, but the collective set of assumptions destroyed the commons.

For several years I have (I hope kindly and gently) stopped students as they have attempted to save a second or two by cutting across the grass or shrubbery. I remember once pointing back to an area that was once grass but that now looked like hardscrabble and saying to a student, "Look what you have done."

At first, he looked aghast, but then he said, almost apologetically, "I didn't do that!"

Like the New England cow owner, as an individual he was right, but collectively he had destroyed the beauty of that section of the "university commons." President Jeffrey R. Holland once reminded us that "no individual snowflake ever felt any responsibility for an avalanche" ("Oh, Lord, Keep My Rudder True," *BYU 1985–86 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1986], p. 61). Yet an avalanche is but a collection of individual snowflakes.

In his commencement address in April 1996, President Hinckley quoted with favor a writer who said:

*People might think of a civilized community as one in which there is a refined culture. Not necessarily; first and foremost it is one in which the mass of people subdue their selfish instincts in favour of the common wellbeing. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "Our Fading Civility," inauguration and spring*

commencement address, April 25, 1996, p. 15, quoting from “The Duty of Civility,” *Royal Bank Letter* 76, no. 3 (May/June 1995):2]

Ignoring the common, in whatever context, leads to its destruction. An early, anonymous, concise, yet penetrating poem describes the results of this kind of behavior.

*The law locks up both man and woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common,  
But lets the greater felon loose  
Who steals the common from the goose.*  
[Anonymous, from Edward Potts Cheyney, *Social and Industrial History of England* (1901), introduction]

This principle applies to us in whatever stage of life we find ourselves. Students need to think more about supporting the goals and values of this institution. Faculty need to use their time and efforts to do more than further their own research or professional agenda. And all of us need to be more sensitive to the needs of larger communities around us.

I hope I am not trivializing sacred things by talking about cutting across the grass and individual snowflakes. I don’t want to do what Macaulay, I believe it was, in his famous *History of England*, accused the English Puritans of doing—of making everything sacred, and thus making the sacred trivial. But I am reminded of a story told to me by a friend of mine who is an area authority of the Church in the northeast. He reported a conversation with a district judge in New York City who, on being asked why that illustrious, but oft-maligned city was beginning to actually look a little better, responded that it was because they were enforcing the anti-spitting laws. My friend was surprised by the response and asked what that had to do with the general decline in crime and other positive indicators of improvement. The judge replied that they had discovered that if they enforced the little

things that were actually enforceable—anti-spitting, anti-jaywalking, and other seemingly rather insignificant ordinances—then general respect for the city and its moral authority seemed to improve. What were a few years ago actual pockets of anarchy in urban life have now become much more orderly—and here is the important point—thus giving city dwellers more freedom (conversation with Elder Robert S. Wood, April 29, 1998).

### Community Service

I believe that accountable citizenship requires concern for community life, for the commons, as well as concern for individual goals—it requires us to give “obedience to the unenforceable.” It may even go beyond that. It may require voluntary community activities. It may require—as Dean Erlend Peterson pointed out in his devotional address a few months ago (17 March 1998)—significant individual and collective efforts to create or protect community values and standards, thus following the Lord’s admonition to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and [to] do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27).

Erastus Snow, an early pioneer and Church leader, once asked:

*What man, however good be his desires, can control himself and his family in their habits and manners of life and fashions, without the aid of the surrounding community? What sensible man can hold me or my brethren responsible, in all respects, either for ourselves or our households, unaided by the community and while the community are all working against us? But when the community learn to work together, and are agreed in a common purpose, what is it that they can not accomplish? Union is strength. [JD 17:74]*

Brothers and sisters, we are but individual snowflakes, but if we are not more concerned with community life, if we pursue merely our



own selfish desires and goals, we will create avalanches of social ills.

### Separation of Church and State

On another issue, D&C 134:4 calls for mutual respect and deference between state and religion.

*We believe that religion is instituted of God; and that men are amenable to him, and to him only, for the exercise of it, unless their religious opinions prompt them to infringe upon the rights and liberties of others; but we do not believe that human law has a right to interfere in prescribing rules of worship to bind the consciences of men, nor dictate forms for public or private devotion; that the civil magistrate should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul.*

We must be ever so careful, particularly in communities where LDS people predominate, to avoid using civil authority to enforce singularly unique LDS practices or to “dictate forms for public or private devotion” merely because we have the political power to do so. At the same time, we must work as hard as we can in all levels of politics—as individuals and as groups, but not as a church—to establish and enforce general moral and ethical standards.

In summary, I have tried to suggest that accountable citizenship requires:

1. Appreciation and respect for the concept of government.

2. A well-established and orderly government to prevent anarchy, terror, and dictatorship.

3. A willingness to participate in political affairs and to be accountable for one’s political actions.

4. A willingness to withhold judgment and to honor and respect those involved in civic affairs whether elected, appointed, or volunteers.

5. A willingness to obey, honor, and sustain the law.

6. Considerable self-sacrifice and respect for the needs of others and for the common good.

7. A good dose of community spirit animated by healthy volunteerism.

8. A respect for the distinction between church and state.

I am deeply grateful for the inspired teaching of this and other sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. I am grateful for the principle of continuing revelation. I bear my testimony as to the truthfulness and relevance of these inspired scriptures in our lives today. And I pray that we will prepare ourselves for living in an eventual Zion community by bringing the principles of a Zion community into our lives today, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Notes

1. It is commonly believed that this statement was written by Oliver Cowdery, perhaps with the help of W. W. Phelps, and later adopted at a general assembly of the Church on August 17, 1835 (see Bryner, “Politics: Political Teachings,” pp. 1103–4). At this same assembly, this declaration was voted to be included as section 102 in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. It appeared as section 110 and as section 134 in subsequent editions (see Richard O. Cowan, *The Doctrine and Covenants: Our Modern Scripture* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984], p. 218).

2. For a different view of section 134, see Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), pp. 852–53.

3. This is not to suggest that the New Testament does not solve this dilemma. Even non-LDS scholars point out that the problem of church and state is solved in the New Testament: “Surely the Kingdom of God should be of infinitely more value to us than the State; but it is wrong to attack the State violently in order to set up the Kingdom of God” (Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New*

*Testament*, rev. ed. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956], p. 21). Nevertheless, the tension between church and state has reappeared many times through the centuries.

4. See also First Presidency message, "An Address: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the World," *CR*, April 1907, appendix, pp. 1–16.