

## FREE MORAL WILL, OR AGENCY

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 of Latter Day Saints  
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TEXT:....."Ye are free to act for yourselves; to choose the way of everlasting death, or the way of everlasting life. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh." --  
 2 Nephi 7:40,41.

## SCRIPTURE READING: Moroni 7:13-17

"Behold, my beloved brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night. For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that they may know good from evil; wherefore I shew unto you the way to judge; for everything which inviteth to do good and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; Wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge, it is of God; but whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil, For after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no not one; neither doth his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge, ye shall also be judged."

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One of the oldest topics debated by philosophers is the question of whether man is a free agent -- whether he was made to act for himself, or to be acted upon. Many philosophers, and even some world religions, teach that man is made to be acted upon -- that he is the helpless pawn of blind and purposeless forces which surround him in Nature -- that he is a puppet dangling on the strings of fate. There are people who believe that their lives are controlled for them by the position of the stars, or by the number of letters in their name. Even among some Christian theologians there are those who believe in and teach the doctrine of predestination, which denies man his right to act for himself or to choose, and asserts that God for his own good will and pleasure created man either to be saved or lost. Other remnants of the idea that man is made to be acted upon by forces which he cannot control are evidenced by our belief in good and bad luck, our eagerness to carry a rabbit's foot or to knock on wood or to do some other foolish and useless thing in an effort to ward off or evade what we call bad luck.

True Christianity, on the other hand, is the religion of hope. Christianity, and the Judaism from which it sprang, have always taught that man was made to have dominion over himself, and over the earth on which he dwells -- that he was made to act, and not to be acted upon. True Christianity teaches that through the power of Christ and his atonement, the possibilities of change in man are infinite -- that his possibilities for growth and development and perfection are limitless -- if he will but make his own choices, exercise his agency in the right way, and take advantage of the opportunities and gifts which God has made available to him.

Of course there are some forces which we cannot completely control. As yet we can predict, but not control, the weather. Sometimes fire still gets out of control. We cannot prevent tornadoes; we cannot turn off the rain which is causing

floods; we cannot bring the rain that will end drouths; we cannot prevent earthquakes. There are still several forms of disease which we seem to be powerless to prevent or to heal. But even in the face of these forces of nature, man is not completely helpless; he does not simply have to sit still and let these forces act upon him. He can act for himself. He can invent air conditioning. He can build storm cellars, or keep out of the known and established path of tornadoes; he can build dikes and dams for flood control; he can establish fire prevention and fire protection, or build of fireproof materials; he can build his buildings to resist earthquakes; he can establish sanitation, drain swamps, eliminate disease-bearing insects and rodents, and immunize himself and his children against many scourges that were once considered acts of God upon men who were helpless to do anything about them.

If man is to act for himself, and not merely to be acted upon, there must be free moral will, or agency. I believe that the doctrine of agency, or free moral will is the most important single item in all of our Christian philosophy. Even the all important mission of Christ centers around it. All the scriptures indicate that God himself places a high evaluation on agency. God himself must exercise agency. There can be no one greater than he, to force him to be good: he is good because he chooses to be good. I know that Christ exercised agency, for in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed that he might not have to drink of the cup of suffering and death; but he made his choice, of his own free will, in the words, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done."

Though scriptural texts bearing on the subject are sketchy and fragmentary, it seems obvious that there was agency in heaven, before the world was created. Lucifer, the Son of the Morning, had the right to choose whether he would continue to serve God, obey him, and abide in his presence, or rebel against him. He chose to rebel; and we are told that one third of the host of heaven joined him in that rebellion. That was an exercise of agency.

Joseph Smith, in his Inspired Version of the Bible, added some verses to the third chapter of Genesis which give an interesting and highly plausible explanation of why Lucifer rebelled. Lucifer came to God with an offer to become the Savior of the world. The method he proposed was force, compulsion, coercion. "If you let me go," he said, "not one soul shall be lost." As his reward for this achievement, Lucifer demanded that he should receive the honor and glory which God had reserved unto himself. Notice how familiar this pattern is -- one personality trying to coerce, compel, control, and rule over other personalities, in order to augment his own honor, power, and glory. That was the devil's method before the world was created; it is still the devil's method today, whether it is used by individuals, by governments, or even by ecclesiastical organizations. God's method, and the method of his Son, is to invite men to come, to obey. Whosoever will come, may come; but he is not compelled to come. The way of Lucifer, who became Satan, is to compel men against their will. God does not compel men, because there is no moral value in an act which is forced upon a helpless slave.

When man was created and placed in the Garden of Eden, he was given agency. He was told not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but there was no force to prevent him from eating if he wanted to. By exercising his agency in choosing to disobey God, man fell. Now, note this carefully; by this initial exercise of agency, Adam lost his agency! Having partaken of the forbidden fruit, death was the only thing which he could hope for or expect. He was helpless now to choose life; there was no life to choose. Satan had power over him, both body and spirit -- no matter what he did, or how he chose. It was to break this deadlock, to provide man an alternative to death, so that he could choose between life and death, that the saving mission of Christ was preached to Adam, and that later Christ came into the world in the meridian of time, to bring to pass his infinite

atonement upon all men so that all men might choose.

There is a gem written by one of the Book of Mormon prophets several hundred years before Christ, which explains this principle. We quote: "And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall, they have become free for ever, knowing good from evil; To act for themselves, and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the Lord, at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all man, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; For he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself." All of the freedoms we have -- political, social, or moral, stem from the fact that Christ came and died and rose again to provide the alternative to death, which is life, in order that all our choices might have meaning and significance.

The Old Testament narrates many instances of the exercise of agency by the people of Israel. They were never compelled; they were always free to choose whether they would obey God or someone else. Such phrases as "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;" (Deut. 11:26) "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil;" (Deut. 30:15) and "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve...." (Joshua 24:15) indicate that Israel was always free to choose. When Samuel inquired of the Lord concerning Israel's demand for a king, God did not counsel force, compulsion, regimentation. He told Samuel to warn the people solemnly of how a king would destroy their liberties, but to "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee...." (1 Sam. 8:7,22) Even in the days of Jesus, Israel was still free to choose. It was their deliberate choice to reject their Messiah which prompted Jesus to say, "How oft would I have gathered you....and ye would not."

Agency requires at least four factors before it can be truly called agency. First, there must be two or more alternatives between which a choice can be made. Second, there must be a knowledge of which alternative is right and which is wrong, or which is better and which is best. There can be no moral value in a choice made ignorantly or by chance; and there should be no moral blame attaching to wrong choices made without knowledge.

Third, agency requires freedom of choice. If there are two or more alternatives, but you are forced or coerced into making one, and forbidden to make any other, there is no agency, and no real choice. And fourth, agency requires accountability. Somewhere, somehow, some time, the consequences of choice, its rewards or punishments, must be given to those who choose; there must be a judgment and an accounting.

Because we believe that God is tremendously concerned about agency, we of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints believe that he is equally concerned about government. We are told in the revelations given through Joseph Smith that we should support and uphold the Constitution of these United States, in order that it might be maintained for the protection of all flesh according to just and holy principles, and that every man may act according to his own agency, and be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment. Because any violation of agency is wrong, God told this church in 1833 that "it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another." In the Book of Mormon, the principle is clearly enunciated that defensive warfare is justified against those who would destroy the free moral will and agency of man by taking away his liberties and freedoms. Governments exist for the purpose of enabling men to cooperate for such mutual protection, and for the enlargement, enrichment, and conservation of men's

agency and freedom.

When men get careless about exercising their agency by use of the ballot, there are always those followers of Satan who quickly step in to appropriate and curtail men's liberties, and bring them into bondage. Therefore as a church we have been instructed to seek for and uphold good and honorable and just and wise men by our vote.

Nations, as well as individual men, exercise agency. The choices of a nation's citizens find expression in its form of government, its methods of government, in the honesty and efficiency, or the dishonesty and waste, of that government. One of the significant passages of the Book of Mormon warns that "if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you; yea, then is the time he will visit you with great destruction...." There is accountability for choice -- nationally, as well as personally.

We close with this exhortation, which is the language of Samuel -- another Book of Mormon prophet: "And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself, and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge, and he hath made you free; He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you." (Helaman 5:85-86)

Let us always choose good, that life and good may be restored to us in the day of judgment and accountability.