

Joseph Smith and Agency

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THE PRINCIPLE OF AGENCY AS revealed to and taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith constitutes an integral part of the restored gospel. Joseph once referred to agency as “that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts.”¹ Blessed with numerous visions, revelations, and other spiritual privileges, Joseph understood heaven’s gifts perhaps more than any other Latter-day Saint; he was certainly qualified to make this statement. To understand agency as Joseph did—as one of heaven’s “choicest gifts”—one must look to his contributions regarding the principle. Indeed, his teachings play a vital role in the Latter-day Saint understanding of agency.

Throughout his life, Joseph Smith provided key information and significant insight into the nature, importance, and value of agency. His personal life and teachings offer valuable clues to our understanding.

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However, in considering Joseph Smith's contributions to our understanding of agency, it is necessary to consider not only his personal views and experiences but also the essential information found in the scriptures he brought to light. This chapter will examine the role Joseph played in helping us understand the doctrine of agency by examining the scriptures of the Restoration as well as the Prophet's personal and public writings, his sermons, and his relationship with others.

Nature of Agency

In examining the role that Joseph Smith played in developing our knowledge of agency, it is helpful to understand in general terms the meaning of agency. Agency, which is also referred to as "free agency" and "moral agency," is a gift from God that endows individuals with the power to choose and act for themselves. Exercising agency is a spiritual matter and involves accountability for one's choices and actions. Joseph Smith presented extensive information on the principle of agency, providing understanding of the key traits that distinguish it from other gospel principles.

A fitting place to begin a discussion of the nature of agency is the concept of opposition found in the scriptures Joseph helped to bring forth. Consider the words of Lehi: "It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one" (2 Nephi 2:11). As Lehi explains, if there were no opposition, we could not use our agency and make clear-cut choices.

Modern revelation through Joseph further clarifies the role of opposition. "And it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be

agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet” (D&C 29:39). In this case, the bitter and the sweet represent alternatives that are in opposition to each other. It is between these alternatives that we must choose. Two more scriptures from 2 Nephi illustrate this point about alternative choices. “Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. . . . 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 Mediator of all men, 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” (2 Nephi 2:16, 27). With the presence of opposition come alternatives, and it is then possible to make precise choices.

Not only is opposition necessary in order for agency to exist, but certain other conditions must be present as well. These conditions include law, knowledge, un-compelled choice, and responsibility. The concept of law and its relationship to agency is found in the teachings of Alma: “Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment? But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:17, 22). When we exercise agency, we come into contact with justice and mercy.

Concerning law, Joseph Smith taught the following in a speech delivered before Congress in February 1840. The

speech was recorded in a letter by Congressman Mathew L. Davis: “I believe . . . that a man is a moral, responsible, free agent; that although it was foreordained he should fall, and be redeemed, yet after the redemption it was not foreordained that he should again sin. In the Bible a rule of conduct is laid down for him; in the Old and New Testaments the law by which he is to be governed, may be found. If he violates that law, he is to be punished for the deeds done in the body.”² When we exercise agency, the consequences of our actions are governed by eternal law. This happens automatically, without reference to our own feelings.

Joseph also taught that knowledge is important if one wishes to properly exercise agency in making wise choices. In his remarkable King Follett address, Joseph taught that “knowledge saves a man.”³ The Prophet taught further that “we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know unless we comply with or keep those we have already received.”⁴ As Joseph made clear, knowledge can save us not only because it gives us the understanding that enables us to make proper choices, but it also increases our options, that is, our range of choices.

Another element necessary for the proper operation of agency is unencumbered choice—the freedom to choose without external force or restriction. A revelation to Joseph Smith clarifies this point: “For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward” (D&C 58:28). As agents unto themselves, individuals have the power to make their own choices, independent of outside influences.

Writing to the elders of the Church, both in Kirtland and abroad, on January 22, 1834, Joseph Smith declared: “We deem it a just principle, and it is one the force of which

we believe ought to be duly considered by every individual, that all men are created equal, and that all have the privilege of thinking for themselves upon all matters relative to conscience. Consequently, then, we are not disposed, had we the power, to deprive any one of exercising that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts.”⁵ Like the Lord, who gave us our “free independence of mind,” Joseph expresses his sincere belief that individual agency is so vital that it must not be taken from anyone. In order for agency to function as the Lord intended, individuals may be influenced, but never compelled.

The Prophet offered insight into the role responsibility plays in the successful use of agency. Without responsibility, he explained, there would be no expectation that we would use our agency appropriately. During a series of instructions to the Relief Society during the spring and summer of 1842, Joseph taught the sisters concerning this principle: “After this instruction, you will be responsible for your own sins; it is a desirable honor that you should so walk before our heavenly Father as to save yourselves; we are all responsible to God for the manner we improve the light and wisdom given by our Lord to enable us to save ourselves.”⁶ Joseph clearly explains that once we have light and knowledge we are in a position to appropriately exercise our agency. The Lord leaves no excuse for improper use of agency, for the Prophet tells us that we will be accountable for our own salvation according to the manner in which we use our agency. The Lord allows for opposition and provides us with the law, knowledge, and freedom of choice, but He also requires our responsibility in exercising our agency.

Furthermore, Joseph Smith’s teachings concerning the nature of agency include significant information about the

role of Satan and the role of God. The *Times and Seasons* summarizes a sermon given by the Prophet on May 16, 1841: “[The Prophet] then observed that Satan was generally blamed for the evils which we did, but if he was the cause of all our wickedness, men could not be condemned. The devil could not compel mankind to do evil; all was voluntary. Those who resisted the Spirit of God, would be liable to be led in to temptation, and then the association of heaven would be withdrawn from those who refused to be made partakers of such great glory. God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not; and such ideas as were entertained [on these subjects] by many were absurd.”⁷ Joseph makes it apparent that sin is a choice, committed after we have resisted the Holy Spirit. Satan tempts, but he cannot force us to do evil.

On the subject of agency as it relates to understanding doctrine, Joseph Smith explained the following in general conference on April 8, 1843: “I never thought it was right to call up a man and try him because he erred in doctrine. . . . I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels so good not to be trammelled. It don’t prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine.”⁸ Here, the Prophet explains that because of agency humans are free to believe or not believe. They should not be forced to conform to a certain belief.

Clearly, Joseph Smith possessed and shared significant knowledge about the nature of agency. Although the concept of agency certainly existed before he did, he added considerably to our understanding of the principle. His teachings not only offer insight into the necessary elements of opposition, law, knowledge, uncompelled choice, and responsibility in agency but also the role of God and Satan in the exercise of that agency.

Importance of Agency

Joseph Smith also contributed greatly to our understanding of the importance of agency as a key element in the plan of salvation. This plan is central to our understanding of the purpose of life. Joseph Smith described the plan of salvation as “a scheme of salvation, having as its great objects, the bringing back of man into the presence of the King of heaven.”⁹ Because of the grandeur and extensiveness of the plan, Joseph taught that agency played a significant role in every stage.

The first component of the plan of salvation deals with our existence in the presence of God before this world was created. The scriptures of the Restoration explain not only the reality of premortal existence but also the role of agency in that stage of the plan. In the Pearl of Great Price we learn that there was a premortal existence where we lived in the presence of God: “Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; and God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abraham 3:22–23). In the premortal existence, we see the first evidence of agency.

The Council in Heaven convened by God the Eternal Father clearly shows the operation of the principle of agency.¹⁰ In an effort to allow His children the opportunity to progress, the Father presented a plan, but when two opposing approaches were taken to that plan, the matter of choice came into play. Lucifer suggested, “Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it;

wherefore give me thine honor” (Moses 4:1). Lucifer would save all mankind but destroy our agency in the process. However, the Savior offered a different proposal. He said, “Here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27), and “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2). In sharp contrast to the devil’s approach, the Savior offered a different means of redemption, one in which agency would be retained and God’s children could progress according to their own free will. The great council presented two significant choices: acceptance or rejection of the Father’s plan and the selection of a Redeemer. With the opposing views set forth, the spirit children of God were at liberty to exercise their agency.

The Doctrine and Covenants also shows the role agency played in the premortal world. Explaining the rebellion of the devil in the premortal era, the Lord reveals that “also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he [Satan] away from me because of their agency” (D&C 29:36). Although God’s presence must have been a great influence in our premortal lives, the Lord clearly reveals that we still had our agency. The Lord also highlights the importance of our exercise of that agency as He reveals the fate of those who exercised the gift unwisely: “And they were thrust down, and thus came the devil and his angels” (D&C 29:37). Even before the creation of our mortal home, God had given us our agency and had taught us to use it appropriately.

Not only do we learn that God’s spirit children were free to choose between Lucifer and the Savior in the premortal existence, but the scriptures of the Restoration also show the importance of agency through the respective proposals of Lucifer and Jehovah. Each proposal revolved around agency, a subject of great importance to God. He says: “Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I the Lord

God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; and he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice” (Moses 4:3–4). The principle of agency is a critical element in this situation. Apparently, God feels so strongly about agency that He identifies it as one of the key parts of Satan’s rebellion. In contrast, the Savior’s desire to preserve God-given agency helped make His offering acceptable. Whether through the contrasting values in the proposals of Lucifer and the Savior or our freedom to choose between the two, the whole development of the Council in Heaven makes clear the importance of agency in the premortal world.

Joseph Smith increased our understanding of the importance of agency through modern-day scriptures not only in the context of the preearth life but also in mortality. Moving to the mortal sphere in our consideration of the plan of salvation, it becomes apparent that agency remains central. The Lord revealed that after He placed Adam on the earth, “[He] gave unto [Adam] that he should be an agent unto himself” (D&C 29:35). He expected that mankind would use agency in order to progress. In order to allow Adam and Eve to exercise their agency, He gave them commandments and choices. The conditions of one choice are found in the Pearl of Great Price: “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it [the Lord told Adam and Eve], nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die” (Moses 3:17). Knowing the growth possible by wisely exercising agency, the Lord created an earth

where His children would always have an environment of choice.

Presented with the opportunity, Adam and Eve exercised their agency and made choices with consequences for them and their posterity. Through the Fall, Adam and Eve were able to have children. Their descendents are subject to making choices between good and evil as well. All are free to choose as they desire. “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 Mediator of all men, 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” (2 Nephi 2:27). With the Fall of Adam and Eve came the opportunity for all to be tested to see if they could overcome the penalties imposed by the Fall. Indeed, that was one of the great purposes of mortality. God would “prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

Finally, Joseph Smith contributed to our understanding of the great importance of agency in the plan of salvation through his teachings of the effects of our mortal choices on our postmortal life. Joseph explained that choices made concerning the Atonement will determine how individuals fare at the Final Judgment. He explained this relationship between agency and the Atonement in his King Follett Discourse: “The salvation [Atonement] of Jesus Christ was wrought out for all men, in order to triumph over the devil; for if it did not catch him [man] in one place, it would in another; for he stood up as a Savior. All will suffer until they obey Christ himself.”¹¹ The Prophet makes it clear that unless we exercise our agency to access the Atonement, we will suffer.

Deciding to repent and accept the full impact of the Atonement propels us toward eternal life and exaltation. A decision to reject the opportunity to repent moves us in the opposite direction. As Amulek, the Book of Mormon prophet, expressed, “For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked” (Alma 34:35). Here in mortality we can exercise our agency as we see fit, but as Joseph Smith and the scriptures teach, we must be prepared to face the consequences of those choices, which will undoubtedly come.

Perhaps we will not fully understand agency and its consequences until the Final Judgment. All who have passed through mortality must stand before the judgment bar to be judged according to their faith and works—faith and works which resulted in large measure from the exercise of our agency. Since all are not alike in personality or ability, the rewards and punishments are carefully suited to the individual. There is no simple dichotomy between heaven and hell but rather a wide range of possibilities. Information received by Joseph Smith through heavenly visions assures us that there are several degrees of glory available to us based on our performance in mortality (see D&C 76).

This brief summary of the plan of salvation shows its strong interrelationship with the principle of agency. As shown, Joseph Smith and the scriptures he brought forth teach that agency is essential. If the plan is compared to a journey leading to exaltation, agency is found at every step of the way.

Value of Agency

Although Joseph Smith contributed greatly to our general understanding of the nature and importance of agency as a part of the plan of salvation, perhaps his most interesting contribution to our understanding of agency is the value that he personally placed on it. He taught more in the example of his personal life, perhaps, than in any of his formal teachings. The true and lasting value of the principle of agency is best demonstrated in his concept of teaching people correct principles and allowing them to govern themselves. Like the God of heaven, who would not allow Lucifer to take away the agency of man, Joseph felt strongly about allowing individuals their free exercise of agency.

While the teaching is well known, there are no first-hand, contemporary records of the Prophet's statement about allowing the people to govern themselves. The accounts are secondhand, and some were written several years after his death. Probably the closest account to Joseph Smith's time is the report found in the Howard Coray Autobiography. The Coray family lived in Nauvoo in the 1840s, but the autobiography was written later. The following is an excerpt from that work: "Stephen A. Douglass called to see him [Joseph Smith] and ask him some questions. One thing he desired to know, was how he managed to govern a people so diverse, coming from so many different countries with their peculiar manners and customs. 'Well,' he said 'I simply teach them the truth, and they govern themselves,' was his ready answer."¹² Later statements, two by John Taylor and one by Erastus Snow, state the familiar phrase, "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."¹³ Implied in all these accounts is the idea that people have their agency and are

allowed to choose for themselves. Once they understand correct principles, they will voluntarily choose to be obedient. Their belief and their behavior will be in perfect harmony. The faith that the Prophet demonstrated in allowing individuals to choose for themselves should add significant insight to our understanding of the value of agency.

The value that Joseph Smith placed on agency was further demonstrated in his willingness to let people make choices even if the consequences had a negative impact on the Church or on Joseph himself. The agency of others was sacrosanct. This trait is especially apparent in his relationships with people who were at cross-purposes with him. His experience with Orson Hyde, for example, demonstrates the Prophet's feelings on the matter.

Orson Hyde fell victim to a tidal wave of apostasy that swept through Missouri in 1838. Even though he had been a member of the Council of the Twelve, Hyde signed an affidavit that alleged the Mormons had sworn destruction to the Missourians by employing the Danites and related groups. The effect on the Saints in Missouri was devastating. Their suffering increased enormously, and Orson Hyde was excommunicated because of the damage he had done.

Almost immediately, Hyde recognized the error of his ways and honestly sought to be forgiven and reinstated. He attended a conference of the Church in June 1839 where he gave an account of his conduct and was reinstated into the Church. Although he and the Church had been seriously injured by Orson Hyde, Joseph Smith agreed to accept him back into the Church and restored him to the office of Apostle.¹⁴ Joseph was willing to allow him to exercise his agency and make his own decisions. Joseph believed, however, that Hyde had to accept the consequences of his own decision. He was willing to forgive bad choices when

sincere repentance followed those choices, for he understood the worth of agency.

Joseph Smith's views on religious freedom also revealed his personal views on the worth of agency. In 1842 the editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, John Wentworth, asked Joseph to prepare a brief history and statement of Latter-day Saint beliefs. The statement of beliefs became known as the Articles of Faith. Of special relevance to the discussion of agency is the eleventh article, published in the Pearl of Great Price: "We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may."

Joseph elaborated on this idea in the King Follett Discourse: "But meddle not with any man for his religion: and all governments ought to permit every man to enjoy his religion unmolested. No man is authorized to take away life in consequence of difference of religion, which all laws and governments ought to tolerate and protect, right or wrong."¹⁵ Shortly after Joseph delivered this sermon, intolerant religious persecutors took the Prophet's life because of his conviction to worship as he pleased. In a significant way, Joseph's martyrdom not only sealed his testimony of the restored gospel, but it also left a testimony of his dedication to the principle of agency. Although he was persecuted throughout his life, he defended his agency until his death.

Committed to agency throughout his life, Joseph Smith taught it, lived it, and even died for it. He took great pleasure in the knowledge he had concerning the subject. In his diary for April 8, 1843, the Prophet wrote, "I feel so good to have the privilege of thinking & believing as I please."¹⁶ He valued agency so much because he fully understood it. He treasured its potential for good in the lives

of the Saints. Through modern-day scriptures, his public teachings, and his personal life, Joseph helped us understand the principle as well. His contributions make clear to us why agency truly is “one of [heaven’s] choicest gifts.”

Notes

1. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 31.
2. Mathew L. Davis, quoted in Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings*, 31.
3. Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, eds., *The Prophet Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1983), 61.
4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:135.
5. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:6–7.
6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:606. Although Joseph Smith used the word *responsible*, it also includes a sense of *accountability*.
7. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:358.
8. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 183–84.
9. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings*, 481–82.
10. Cannon and Dahl, *King Follett Discourse*, 64–65.
11. Cannon and Dahl, *King Follett Discourse*, 65.
12. Howard Coray Autobiography, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
13. *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855–86), 10:57–58.

14. Howard H. Barron, *Orson Hyde* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1977), 105–7. The difficulties Joseph had with his brother William and his own willingness to forgive are found in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 2:117.
15. Cannon and Dahl, *King Follett Discourse*, 25.
16. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 187.