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The Constitution as a Forerunner to Christ's Reign

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The Lord speaks persistently of the Second Coming in the Doctrine and Covenants as though the subject were never far from His mind. Shortly after the Restoration, the Lord commanded His servants to warn the world of “the desolation of abomination in the last days” and “to teach them of a judgment which is to come” (D&C 84:117, 87). The Lord also instructed missionaries to declare, “Repent, repent, and prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (D&C 33:10). It is not coincidental that this precise message was relayed prior to His first coming by John the Baptist, Alma the Younger, and Samuel the Lamanite (see Matthew 3:2–3; Alma 7:9; Helaman 14:9).

To prepare the earth for His return, the Lord is “bringing to pass the restoration of all things” in the last days (D&C 27:6). It is significant that the restoration of all things includes things both spiritual and temporal, for the Lord “will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (D&C 27:13). As part of this process, the Lord has restored inspired government to the earth through the instrumentality of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is readily acknowledged that the Constitution played a key role in preparing the earth for the Restoration of the Church by ensuring religious freedom in the United States. Less noted, but equally important, is the Constitution’s role in preparing the earth for the Second Coming. As its principles spread across the earth, the Constitution acts as an Elias,¹ or forerunner, by preparing the way of the Lord in two

important ways. First, the principles of liberty contained in the Constitution allow men to act “according to [their] moral agency,” making them “accountable for [their] own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78). Second, the Constitution serves as a forerunner to the Lord’s government by creating a provisional system of government that prepares the world for the more perfect rule of Christ and His kingdom (see D&C 38:22).

Agency Necessary

In a rare moment of divine disclosure, the Savior told the Prophet Joseph Smith *why* He established the Constitution: “That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78). This remarkable passage reveals the importance of self-government in the principle of individual accountability. Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed the relationship between freedom and accountability in a talk commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the Constitution: “The most desirable condition for the effective exercise of God-given moral agency is a condition of maximum freedom and responsibility. In this condition men are accountable for their own sins and cannot blame their political conditions on their bondage to a king or tyrant. This condition is achieved when the people are sovereign, as they are under the Constitution God established.”² When people are free to act according to their moral agency, “they are left without excuse, and their sins are upon their own heads” (D&C 88:82) rather than on the head of a king. It follows, therefore, that when Christ “shall come to recompense unto every man according to his work” (D&C 1:10), His judgments will be wholly just. Naturally, then, constitutional principles must cover the earth before the earth can be burned (see D&C 64:23).

President Ezra Taft Benson noted that “in the Book of Mormon we find a pattern for preparing for the Second Coming.”³ The Lord’s coming was preceded by a dramatic shift from kings to self-government. This system of judges following the death of King Mosiah II lasted approximately 120 years. One of the principal benefits of the change, as Mosiah explained, was that the people’s sins would thereafter “be answered upon their own heads. For behold I say unto you, the sins of many people have been caused by the iniquities of their kings; therefore their iniquities are answered upon the heads of their kings” (Mosiah 29:30–31). In a way we do not fully understand, a king stands

between the Lord and the people, thereby getting some of the credit for the people's righteousness but also part of the blame for their iniquity. For the Nephites, the advantages of self-government were so great that they gladly accepted the burden of increased accountability, "and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins" (Mosiah 29:38). While the Nephite system of judges did not apparently operate with a separation of powers like that contained in the Constitution, both governments were inspired by God and vouchsafed the principles of liberty, equality, and accountability.⁴

The kinds of government the Lord established in ancient and modern America demonstrate His respect for individual and collective freedom. The Book of Mormon teaches that "the Spirit of God . . . is also the spirit of freedom" (Alma 61:15). That being the case, it is no wonder that "the Spirit of the Lord is grieved" when men or governments attempt "to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness" (D&C 121:37). A correct understanding of agency and accountability, therefore, provides the key for judging all government proposals, projects, programs, and policies. President J. Reuben Clark Jr. said, "[God] has always condemned that which takes away man's free agency. This is His way. You may judge every proposal for human government by this principle."⁵ Thus the principles of freedom, agency, and accountability act as an unfailing compass in the storm of political debate.

Freedom is closely related to agency, but they are not the same thing. Elder Oaks taught that no one can strip us of our agency, but "what can be taken away or reduced by the conditions of mortality is our *freedom*, the power to act upon our choices. Free agency is absolute, but in the circumstances of mortality freedom is always qualified."⁶ The essential characteristic of agency is the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Agency is not based upon general knowledge, but rather upon the specific knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve, for example, did not partake of the tree of knowledge; they ate from the tree of knowledge *of good and evil* (see Genesis 2:9; emphasis added; Moses 3:9; Abraham 5:9). The Lord highlighted the heart of agency when He told Adam, "And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves" (Moses 6:56). Because agency allows us to discern right from wrong, it is wholly dependent upon the Light of Christ, which "is given to every man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16). In other words, agency as we know it cannot exist in the absence of the Light of Christ.

Attacks on Agency

Since the beginning, Satan has “sought to destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). While we may not fully understand how Satan intended to destroy our agency, some feel that Satan’s plan would have forced us to be righteous. On the other hand, Lehi taught that if we were forced to do good, it would not be counted as righteousness, for without Christ there is no law (see 2 Nephi 2:11–13). In addition, did Satan have the power to compel our hearts and desires? No, for intelligence must stand independent and act for itself, “otherwise there is no existence” (D&C 93:30). Even if our actions could be controlled, good deeds performed without real intent would still be evil (see Moroni 7:6). Rather, if Satan wanted to destroy agency, he would have needed to somehow abolish the Light of Christ itself (see D&C 88:13). Thus the Lord recalls, “[Lucifer] rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power.” As impossible as that seems, Satan must have presented an argument strong enough to seduce “a third part of the hosts of heaven” (D&C 29:36).

This contest that began in our first estate continues into the second. President Benson observed, “The War in Heaven is raging on earth today.”⁷ Unsuccessful in his attempt to supplant the Savior, Satan’s strategy on earth is to reduce our ability to discern right from wrong, thereby crippling our innate Light of Christ. Satan’s temporary success was seen by Enoch, who “beheld Satan; and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced” (Moses 7:26). The Savior described the dire condition of mankind to the early Saints: “And the whole world lieth in sin, and groaneth under darkness and under the bondage of sin. And by this you may know they are under the bondage of sin, because they come not unto me” (D&C 84:49–50).

Governments that prevent people from coming unto Christ are furthering the work of the devil, whereas those that protect freedom of conscience and worship are countenanced with divine approval. Mormon’s counsel is particularly apropos in a general view of political officers, laws, and governments: “Wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore you 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” (Moroni 7:16–17).

Inspired Document

The Constitution is “a glorious standard,”⁸ but that does not mean it is perfect. The document was written by the voice of wisdom rather than of revelation; it was inspired rather than revealed. President Clark said, “It is not my belief nor is it the doctrine of my Church that the Constitution is a fully grown document. On the contrary, we believe it must grow and develop to meet the changing needs of an advancing world.”⁹ The constitutional canon created by the Founders adapts to the times and reflects the character of the people. Elder Neal A. Maxwell testified, “The raising up of that constellation of ‘wise’ Founding Fathers to produce America’s remarkable Constitution, whose rights and protection belong to ‘every man,’ was not a random thing either. One historian called our Founding Fathers ‘the most remarkable generation of public men in the history of the United States or perhaps of any other nation.’”¹⁰

The Founders spent four months in heated debate working out the details of the document we now revere—an experience Benjamin Franklin described as “groping as it were in the dark to find political truth.”¹¹ Yet many of the delegates believed, as Latter-day Saints know, that the Lord was directing them. Franklin confessed to the candidates after a long, divisive debate, “I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—*that God governs in the affairs of men*.”¹² George Washington and James Madison also felt the providence of God in their proceedings, calling the coming forth of the Constitution “a miracle.”¹³ President Wilford Woodruff attested to the framers’ genius; he described the Constitution as “the best human form of government that was ever given to the human family.”¹⁴

Though the Constitution is imperfect, the Lord has endorsed the “just and holy principles” (D&C 101:77) embodied therein. It is critical, therefore, to extract the principles from the text. They become apparent when viewing the Constitution in the context of the Lord’s intent; that is, through the bifocals of agency and accountability. Those principles are eternal because they promote spiritual growth and progression. President David O. McKay taught that “there are some fundamental principles of this republic which, like eternal truths, never get out of date, and which are applicable at all times to liberty-loving peoples. Such are the underlying principles of the Constitution.”¹⁵ We learn from the Doctrine and Covenants that a righteous, peaceful government should hold “inviolable” (1) “the free exercise of conscience,”

(2) “the right and control of property,” and (3) “the protection of life” (D&C 134:2).

Universal Principles

Constitutional principles are not only for Americans. The Lord declared they belong “to all mankind” (D&C 98:5) and are intended to bless “all flesh” (D&C 101:77). President Gordon B. Hinckley reminded us in general conference, “The Constitution under which we live, and which has not only blessed us but has become a model for other constitutions, is our God-inspired national safeguard ensuring freedom and liberty, justice and equality before the law.”¹⁶

The Church has an important charge to spread these principles throughout the world. President John Taylor declared, “Besides the preaching of the Gospel, we have another mission, namely, the perpetuation of the free agency of man and the maintenance of liberty, freedom, and the rights of man.”¹⁷ In order for the Church to fulfill its mission to “proclaim liberty” (Isaiah 61:1) to people who live in spiritual and temporal bondage, the Saints must adhere to President Benson’s counsel to “learn for [them]selves the principles laid down in the Constitution.”¹⁸ If the Saints fail in this important responsibility, the advance of the gospel to all the world may be hindered. “I believe the Lord can do anything he sets his mind to do,” President Spencer W. Kimball said, “But I can see no good reason why the Lord would open doors that we are not prepared to enter. Why should he break down the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Curtain or any other curtain if we are still unprepared to enter?”¹⁹ History demonstrates that religious freedom precedes the preaching of the gospel and that constitutional principles pave the way for the Lord’s messengers. President McKay said, “As thrones topple and monarchies crumble, you will see that the people who are given their free agency will begin to appreciate the principles of self-government, preparatory to their accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the perfect law of liberty. I can see in all this a step toward a truer brotherhood—a preparation for the millennium.”²⁰ An important part of missionary work, then, is to spread the principles of the Constitution among all people so they may receive the blessings of the gospel.

The Lord desires all of His children to enjoy the freedoms and protections of the constitutional government that are had in America. The Lord promised that the American continent “shall be a land of liberty” and that “unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever,” as long as its inhabitants serve Him (2 Nephi 1:7). It is important to remember that

the *land* is choice, not necessarily its *people*. Only the righteous “shall be blessed upon the face of this land” (2 Nephi 1:9), while unto the wicked it shall be “cursed” (2 Nephi 1:7). The Lord is no respecter of persons; Nephi clearly taught that “the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God” (1 Nephi 17:35).

Unfortunately, some people feel that because *America* is choice, somehow being *American* is too. Gratitude for one's country, for example, can sometimes turn into nationalism, vanity, and a feeling of superiority. The prophets have frequently criticized this prideful attitude. President Hinckley taught, “The true gospel of Jesus Christ never led to bigotry. It never led to self-righteousness. It never led to arrogance. The true gospel of Jesus Christ leads to brotherhood, to friendship, to appreciation of others, to respect and kindness and love.”²¹ Patriotism should never serve as a cloak for pride, especially when “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33). President Boyd K. Packer cautioned, “A virtue when pressed to the extreme may turn into a vice.”²² So it is that a healthy sense of patriotism may be pressed into nationalism, which may sometimes lead to racism. The gospel ties the entire human family together in Christ, as Elder Charles Didier taught: “There is in reality only one nation or one culture: the nation of God and the gospel culture.”²³ That is why personal righteousness is more important than citizenship, for the Lord has promised, “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper” (1 Nephi 2:20).

Fate of the Constitution

It is critical to distinguish between the Constitution and the United States of America, since each has a unique role and fate. Modern revelation informs us that God will make “a full end of all nations” in due time (D&C 87:6), and ultimately all worldly governments will bow to the kingdom of Christ (see D&C 65:5–6). Latter-day prophets have suffered severe persecution for preaching this unpopular doctrine. President Taylor, for example, while serving as a missionary in France, prophesied that the kingdom of God would overthrow the French regime, and he was expelled from the country for saying so.²⁴ Joseph Smith was charged with treason and martyred, in part, because he declared that the Church was “as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands” (D&C 65:2) that would overthrow all other governments (see Daniel 2:44–45).²⁵

The Prophet Joseph foresaw the day when the Lord would be the rightful ruler of the earth during the Millennium: “The world has had a fair trial for six thousand years; the Lord will try the seventh thousand

Himself; ‘He whose right it is, will possess the kingdom, and reign until He has put all things under His feet.’”²⁶ The Savior promised His Saints that they would no longer live under man-made laws when He returns, but rather “you shall be a free people, and ye shall have no laws but my laws when I come, for I am your lawgiver” (D&C 38:22). President Taylor, anticipating the glorious day when the Saints will live the Lord’s perfect law, called the Constitution “a preliminary step for the introduction of more correct principles.”²⁷ Thus the Constitution is a stepping-stone toward Zion, for the earth must have “milk” before “meat” (Hebrews 5:13–14).

It is evident from latter-day revelation that the United States will not escape the dark fate of “all nations” (D&C 87:6). In 1843, following the persecutions in Missouri, Joseph Smith told Stephen A. Douglas, then a Supreme Court judge, “I prophesy in the name of the Lord God of Israel, . . . that in a few years the government will be utterly overthrown and wasted, and there will not be so much as a potsherd left.”²⁸ President Woodruff delivered a similar message in 1880, “I ask myself the question, can the American nation escape? The answer comes, No; its destruction, as well as the destruction of the world, is sure.”²⁹ Although President Woodruff predicted the destruction of the country, he foresaw a very different future for the principles of the Constitution: “Though the nation itself might go to pieces, yet it is beyond the power of man to destroy the principles of the constitution. They may destroy one another, yet the principles contained in that instrument will live, and the God of heaven will maintain them until Jesus Christ comes in the clouds of heaven to set up His throne.”³⁰

Many modern-day prophets have taught the Saints’ role in preserving the Constitution’s principles. Elder Orson Hyde, for example, told the Saints, “It is said that brother Joseph in his lifetime declared that the Elders of this Church should step forth at a particular time when the Constitution should be in danger, and rescue it, and save it. This may be so; but I do not recollect that he said exactly so. I believe he said something like this—that the time would come when the Constitution and the country would be in danger of an overthrow; and said he, If the Constitution be saved at all, it will be by the Elders of this Church. I believe this is about the language, as nearly as I can recollect it.”³¹ The conditional nature of Joseph’s prophecy was highlighted by President Benson, who worried that the elders of the Church would not be prepared to fulfill their charge: “Part of the reason we may not have sufficient priesthood bearers to save the Constitution is because unlike Moroni, I fear, our souls do not joy in keeping our country

free, and we are not firm in the faith of Christ, nor have we sworn with an oath to defend our rights and the liberty of our country.”³² The Church, however, is prepared to sacrifice dearly in defense of the Constitution, as Brigham Young pledged, “We will cling to the Constitution of our country, . . . and, if necessary, pour out our best blood for the defence of every good and righteous principle.”³³

At some future day, the principles of the Constitution will thrive in Zion while the rest of the world will largely abandon them, and war will cover the whole earth (see D&C 45:66–71). The Constitution will have an honored place among the Saints at that millennial day. Brigham Young prophesied, “When the day comes in which the Kingdom of God will bear rule, the flag of the United States will proudly flutter unsullied on the flag staff of liberty and equal rights, without a spot to sully its fair surface; the glorious flag our fathers have bequeathed to us will then be unfurled to the breeze by those who have power to hoist it aloft and defend its sanctity.”³⁴ President Benson later repeated this theme, “We, the blessed beneficiaries [of the Constitution], face difficult days in this beloved land. . . . It may also cost us blood before we are through. It is my conviction, however, that when the Lord comes, the Stars and Stripes will be floating on the breeze over this people.”³⁵ It is clear that the principles and ideals for which America stands will endure in Zion.

Conclusion

“I am the greatest advocate of the Constitution of the United States there is on the earth,” proclaimed Joseph Smith,³⁶ and so it may be said of the Church he restored. Latter-day Saints have been counseled to study, understand, defend, and promulgate the principles of the Constitution to all people. As liberty spreads across the earth, the gospel message follows close behind. Only when the principles of constitutional government have reached around the globe will the Church be able to go “into all the world . . . that the testimony may go from you into all the world unto every creature” (D&C 84:62). Then these “just and holy principles” (D&C 101:77), coupled with the message of the restored gospel, will ready the world for the coming of the Lord: for “every man [will] act . . . according to the moral agency which I have given unto him,” and “every man [will] be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78). With rejoicing after the Second Coming, the Saints will live the perfect law of Christ and sustain Him as their king. In that glorious day the principles of freedom and liberty will finally ripen to maturity.

Come, O thou King of Kings!
 We've waited long for thee,
 With healing in thy wings
 To set thy people free.
 Come, thou desire of nations, come;
 Let Israel now be gathered home.³⁷ RE

Notes

1. *Elias* is used as a title for one who prepares or restores. The Bible Dictionary provides an excellent summary under the word "Elias." See also Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 335–37.

2. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Divinely Inspired Constitution," delivered at the America's Freedom Festival Religious Service, July 5, 1987, Provo, Utah.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1986, 5.

4. In Helaman 4:22, Mormon states explicitly that *the Lord* commanded Mosiah to change the government.

5. J. Reuben Clark Jr., as quoted in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 108.

6. Dallin H. Oaks, "Free Agency and Freedom," in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 10. See the entire article for a complete discussion of the differences between agency and freedom.

7. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 658.

8. Joseph Smith said, "The Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God," in a letter to the Saints from Liberty Jail, 20–25 March 1839 (in Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *The Teachings of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 143).

9. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Constitutional Government: Our Birthright Threatened," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 6, no. 2 (1939): 177.

10. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 2002, 16.

11. Quoted in Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention, May to September 1787* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 125.

12. Quoted in Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia*, 126; emphasis in original.

13. Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia*, xi.

14. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 22:346.

15. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 319.

16. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 7, 2001, 89.

17. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:63.

18. Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 594.

19. Spencer W. Kimball, "When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign*, October 1974, 7.
20. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1917, 49.
21. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Inspirational Thoughts," *Ensign*, April 2002, 4.
22. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1990, 108.
23. Charles Didier, in "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, June 1976, 62.
24. Richard D. McClellan, "President Louis Bertrand and the Closure of the French Mission, 1859–64," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Europe*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 2003), 23.
25. See also Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:202–3.
26. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 252.
27. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:31.
28. 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), 5:394.
29. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:301.
30. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:346.
31. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:152.
32. Ezra Taft Benson, "Protecting Freedom—An Immediate Responsibility," *Improvement Era*, December 1966, 1145.
33. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:41.
34. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:317.
35. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Constitution—A Glorious Standard," *Ensign*, September 1987, 11.
36. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 326.
37. "Come, O Thou King of Kings," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 59.