

Scott Wiersdorf  
30 July 2006  
Agency

Agency is, in my opinion, one of the least understood doctrines of the restored gospel. There seems to be a common disconnect between what is taught, and what is practiced. My purpose with this talk is to better illustrate what an agent is, how knowledge is related to our agency, and how God's most faithful servants are not automatons, but perfect agents.

## **Doctrine of Agency**

In the gospel context, the word *agency* describes our capacity to determine where we go after this life. The Book of Mormon teaches the doctrine of agency clearly:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh... 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).

## **Agency and Knowledge**

Each of us was placed upon this earth and given knowledge of good and evil. As we read in 2 Nephi 2:5: "And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil." Knowledge is essential to our agency. In fact, while our basic ability to choose good from evil is eternal and inviolate, our capacity to do good increases with our knowledge, as does our accountability for wrong actions.

As we read in 2 Nephi 9:27, "But wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, *like unto us*, and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state!" (emphasis added).

I make a point of the negative consequences if we use our agency poorly, in case there are any among you who believe that it all works out in the end, that God ultimately will save all people (as Nehor taught—Alma 1:4) regardless of the outcome of this probationary state. That is false doctrine. Helaman 12:25 reads: "And I would that all men might be saved. But we read that in the great and last day there are some who shall be cast out, yea, who shall be cast off from the presence of the Lord."

What of the billions who have died and will die without knowing the gospel of Christ? Are those who sin ignorantly held to the same standard as those with knowledge, such as ourselves, will be? The short answer is, "no." We'll read a few scriptures to illustrate this. We read in D&C 137:7–10:

All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God;

Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom; For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts. And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven.

We plainly see that there is great mercy from the Lord regarding those who died in ignorance of the gospel. But what of those among us who die in their sins? The scriptures speak plainly on this:

But behold, and fear, and tremble before God, for ye ought to tremble; for the Lord redeemeth none such that rebel against him and die in their sins; yea, even all those that have perished in their sins ever since the world began, that have wilfully rebelled against God, that have known the commandments of God, and would not keep them; these are they that have no part in the first resurrection (Mosiah 15:26).

And yet I must point out that while the scriptures are plain on this subject, the hearts of men and women around us are not plain. This is why we are commanded not to judge one another, because we do not know ourselves, let alone each other, as God knows us.

This passage from *Jesus the Christ* by Elder James E. Talmage has brought me great comfort:

"The father of souls has endowed His children with the divine birthright of free agency; He does not and will not control them by arbitrary force; He impels no man toward sin; He compels none to righteousness. Unto man has been given freedom to act for himself; and, associated with this independence, is the fact of strict responsibility and the assurance of individual accountability. In the judgement with which we shall be judged, all the conditions and circumstances of our lives shall be considered. The inborn tendencies due to heredity, the effects of environment whether conducive to good or evil, the wholesome teachings of youth, or the absence of good instruction—these and all other contributory elements must be taken into account in the rendering of a just verdict as to the soul's guilt or innocence. Nevertheless, the divine wisdom makes plain what will be the result with given conditions operating on known natures and dispositions of men, while every individual is free to choose good or evil within the limits of the many conditions existing and operative."—*The Great Apostasy*, p. 21, quoted in *Jesus the Christ*, notes to chapter 3, note 2.

We consider children born with genetic or environmental dispositions to act in certain ways contrary to God's commandments, or so-called "crack-babies" who are addicted to drugs before they were born and likely will be their whole lives, or one whose predisposition and weakness to alcohol is such that one sip of alcohol determines the course of the rest of his mortal life.

While we will be judged by our works, and our knowledge determines our accountability,

there are many other factors in the life of a person that must be weighed for an honest and full judgement to occur. I think at the last day, even the best among us will be standing with some shame on us for what we were unable to overcome in this life, try as we might. But those who have been faithful to their gospel covenants will find that Christ will cover all of these things in mercy, because of his grace, because of his atonement.

We gain light and knowledge line by line, precept by precept as the scriptures describe it, by our obedience to true principles "And no man receiveth a fulness unless he keepeth [God's] commandments. He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things" (D&C 93:27-28).

We also read in D&C 42:61 "If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things, that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal."

The light and knowledge we receive of God will bring us joy and greater opportunities to do good in this life. Let us be willing to make the sacrifice necessary, be it our sins, our bad habits, or our leisure time, let us give ourselves wholly to the Lord, and he will make us into a far more beautiful object than we could ever make ourselves.

### **Agency in the Plan of Salvation**

We now discuss the role of agency in God's plan of salvation. Agency is the pivotal point between God's plan and Satan's plan: (Moses 4:3) "Satan...sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him." with his plan: "I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost". It sounds great, doesn't it? A guarantee that all the kids will make it home safe after the trip.

It is this fear of "not making it home" and the attractiveness of this promise that caused one-third of the hosts of heaven to side with Lucifer and make war with God. You can see the politics of it: a plan where all of God's children are at liberty to make their own decisions, to find their own way, and a plan where all of God's children are guaranteed safety and salvation.

The contrast between the two plans is important enough to retain to this day, because Satan's plan keeps coming up in different forms, such as when our liberties to act according to our conscience are curtailed. I'm not advocating lawlessness—we need good laws to prevent one man using his liberty to do harm to another. But in governments around the world, and sadly in our own on occasion, those in power, though often well-meaning, find ways to reduce our liberty in exchange for some security (D&C 121:39). But in the context of the plan of salvation, this is not God's way.

We sing in Hymn 240:

Know this that every soul is free,  
To choose his life and what he'll be;

For this eternal truth is given,  
That God will force no man to heaven.

He'll call, persuade, direct aright;  
And bless with wisdom, love and light;  
In nameless ways be good and kind;  
But never force the human mind.

And this scripture from Alma 30:7–9: "Now there was no law against a man's belief; for it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on to unequal grounds. For thus saith the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve. Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him; but if he did not believe in him there was no law to punish him."

Or this passage from D&C 134:4, 9 (one of my favorites) regarding the role of governments in allowing men to worship as they please without restriction or interference, unless those practices harm others:

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 do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government, whereby one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the individual rights of its members, as citizens, denied. (D&C 134:4, 9).

We also have this article of faith:

We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience. We allow all men the same privilege; let them worship how, where, or what they may (Articles of Faith 2).

And finally, this passage from Brigham Young in the Journal of Discourses (July 8, 1855), which seems to be in response to the second article of faith:

"What is the foundation of the rights of man? The Lord Almighty has organized man for the express purpose of becoming an independent being like unto Himself, and has given him his agency. Man is made in the likeness of his Creator, the great archetype of the human species, who bestowed upon him the principles of eternity, planting immortality within him, and leaving him at liberty to act in the way that seemeth good unto him--to choose or refuse for himself, to be a Latter-day Saint, or a Wesleyan Methodist, to belong to the Church of England, the oldest daughter of

the Mother Church, to the old Mother herself, to her sister the Greek Church, or to be an infidel and belong to no church. When the kingdom of God is fully set up and established on the face of the earth, and takes the preeminence over all other nations and kingdoms, it will protect the people in the enjoyment of all their rights, no matter what they believe, what they profess, or what they worship." *Millennial Star* vol. 20, p.43.

If anybody has any doubts as to God's feelings toward our agency and how critical it is that we have a land of liberty to exercise it in, please see me after the meeting.

All of us here on the earth chose God's plan of liberty over Satan's plan of security and guarantees, because we understood God's plan is the only plan where we could become *independent*, rather than *more* dependent. "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence" (D&C 93:30). But Satan still plays up his old tunes when he can get an audience.

### **Agency is Higher than Faith**

Agency is the highest principle of the gospel. This can be demonstrated by how jealously God guards it, even for those who misuse it to harm others. The question the world most often asks related to this topic is, "why does God allow bad things to happen?" The answer the world gives is the fodder for lucrative book deals, but today we will discuss the true and simple answer, free of charge.

On scales both large and small, men do atrocious things to one another. We see examples of this daily in the news media. Pick any recent war—innocent civilians are killed daily. How about the example just this last week of the 5 year-old girl in Salt Lake who was killed and violated in way that defies all goodness and sense. What could a 5 year old do to deserve something like that? This doesn't seem like a fair outcome for her in this life.

The answer to this poignant question has a simple answer, but requires an eternal context to understand. Let us read from Alma chapter 14:8–11. Here we have innocent women and children being thrown into a fire—can you imagine it? The wicked men do this to prove a point to Alma and Amulek:

And when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma: How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames. But Alma said unto him: The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day.

The answer to the question of why does God allow bad people to do bad things only makes sense in the context of the plan of salvation. God allows all men their agency in this life, because "this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God" (Alma 34:32). Were God to remove from men their agency, men could not be fairly judged by their works.

We must keep an eternal perspective! As Alma said, "The Lord receiveth them [the innocents] up unto himself, in glory" and that is a comforting thought. The choices we make are not just for this life, but day by day with our actions or inactions we are laying up in store treasures in heaven, or binding ourselves with the chains of hell, such as those of Jacob Marley in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Agency involves faith to believe that the choices we make now will have consequences in the hereafter, not just local consequences if we get caught. One of Satan's tricks is to limit our perspective: think only about now, and forget about eternity. By ignoring eternity and God's plan when we make our choices, our choices nearly always have very different outcomes.

The lesson that agency is supreme is a hard one, as we'll illustrate in a few moments. For example, not even those with the greatest faith: desperate parents, apostles, prophets, Christ himself; not even their faith can turn a wayward son or daughter out of their course. We have some rare examples of divine intervention, such as the case with Alma the Younger or Saul of Tarsus, but the choice to follow God is still theirs.

While faith cannot negate another's agency, faith *is* sufficient to produce the circumstances and opportunities necessary for a wayward son or daughter to repent and return, sooner or later. This is why a parent will never give up, nor does God give up on us, but is waiting for our faith and their repentance.

### **Limits to Agency**

When our children turn in wrong directions, we fear that we will lose them spiritually. It is this fear that most often causes parents to bind their children's agency. Parenting is a fine balance of agency and protection, justice and mercy, sternness and love. Very young children have not yet the knowledge they need to be full agents. They don't know that touching a hot stove or plugging a fork into the electrical outlet can have, as it were, unsavory results.

So good parents restrict their children's agency according to the child's knowledge: they put small babies into playpens, take away sharp objects, block any holes in walls that have potentially harmful electric current, and remove anything that can launch projectiles (and so forth) to protect their child's physical health.

As a child gains knowledge, they are ready to be tested with their agency more. Forks gradually replace rubber covered spoons, glassware replaces sippy cups. Parents sooner or later teach their children how to correctly use sharp needles, hot irons and stovetops,

table saws, drills and other useful tools so that they can be prepared to be full agents by the time they reach adulthood.

As a child grows in knowledge, a parent allows the child to make more of their own decisions and especially lets them feel the consequences of poor choices. A parent who too often shields their child from a decision made with full knowledge of the outcomes is unwittingly teaching that child the wrong lesson.

The hard part for a parent is when teenagers or even young adults apparently regress in their behavior, seeming to forget all their good training they received as children. Teens are not acting in ignorance as a child would, however. They are more often testing the bounds of authority.

A recent story in the July 2006 *Ensign* illustrates this hard balance parents must sometimes walk, which I hope you'll all read, since I'm only going to summarize here. The principle is "Sometimes positive change cannot occur until parents allow their children to experience the consequences of bad decisions." And in conclusion, the article states, "Parents are accountable to teach their children to take responsibility for their actions. ... Parents can interfere with their children's progress if they try to protect them from the consequences of their actions" (Garth Hanson & Steve Hanson, *Ensign*, July 2006).

### **Three Kinds of Servants**

To understand how the Lord wants us to act here on this earth, we can look to the scriptures for examples. We can identify three kinds of "agents", or "servants" as the scriptures most often call them.

I must point out that the scriptures rarely talk about the ignorant, unrepentant, and worldly Gentile. Nearly all of Christ's parables and teachings, as well as the scriptures in the Book of Mormon talk about people who have taken upon themselves Christ's name—members of his Church. So let's keep that in mind: the three kinds of servants are members of Christ's church, just like us.

The first kind of servant is not spoken about much, because they're really on the wrong track. The scriptures call this type an "unfaithful" or "disobedient" servant. These are members of the Church who having knowledge, have been completely negligent in their duties. They are members only in the computer, as it were. Just a brief mention in scripture:

And in his hot displeasure, and in his fierce anger, in his time, will cut off those wicked, unfaithful, and unjust stewards, and appoint them their portion among hypocrites, and unbelievers; Even in outer darkness, where there is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth (D&C 101:90–91).

We will say no more about this kind of servant—I don't think there are very many of these here today anyway—except that they can repent and get back on the path that leads to eternal life.

The second kind of servant is the slothful servant. The slothful servant is interesting to me because I think he is really the most common kind of servant, but will not wind up in the same place as the faithful servant on judgement day. The third kind of servant is the wise or faithful servant—and this is what we want to be.

Christ's parable of the talents shows us the difference between the latter two kinds of servants, in Matthew 25:14–30.

A master gives some money to his three servants and leaves the country. Two of the servants invested the money and doubled their investment by the time the master returned. The master said to each both of them, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

The third servant kept the money under his mattress—safe and sound—but did nothing to improve his master's investment. The master said unto him, "Thou wicked and slothful servant, ... Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

I always thought it was somewhat unfair that the poor servant who did not squander the money, for example, or spend it on himself, but kept the money safe and returned it, was cast out. That is, until I realized what the money is. The money is our lives—our agency, our works, our time.

What would be really unjust would be to reward the slothful servant just the same as the wise and faithful servants. Neither the unrepentant nor the faithless have a rightful place in God's kingdom. The slothful servant was told nothing and he did nothing. The wise and faithful servants knew their master and were anxiously engaged.

### **Being Anxiously Engaged**

What does it mean to be anxiously engaged? The test of our agency has several questions to it. Question one: will you obey God and reject Satan's temptations to disobey God? All struggle with sin in this life; our mortal weakness guarantees that not one, save Christ only, will be sinless. Thankfully and mercifully God sent Christ—the only one "good enough to pay the price for sin" (Hymns)—to offer himself as a sacrifice—the "great and last sacrifice" (Alma 34:14)—that we can be clean.

The second question of our agency is the most significant one: will you do many things of your own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness? (D&C 58:27)

Those who truly love God will not only obey God when they are asked, but they will be going and doing much good without being asked. It is the neighbor who knows of a need and simply goes and helps, rather than waiting to be asked by a priesthood or Relief Society leader, or hoping that someone else will take care of it.

Where a slothful servant will do their duty and fulfill their calling as asked, a faithful servant will magnify their calling, think and pray about their calling—and never neglecting their own personal responsibilities and roles native to them as a son or daughter of God, including husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, friend and neighbor.

The slothful servant will say—and this may shock some of you who can't even say this for yourselves, "I'm willing to do whatever the bishop asks me to do." Have you ever said that to yourself or to someone else (hopefully the bishop)? This is good, it really is. It's far better than the attitude of "I'll do whatever I please, and I don't care what the bishop asks me to do." or "I'll do whatever the bishop asks me not to do."

But better than those who say "I'm willing to do whatever I'm asked" are those people who do not need to be asked. "For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth *no reward*. Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; 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 58:26–28, emphasis added).

Good works come from a converted and charitable heart, and come from a person choosing that good part (Luke 10:41–42), exercising their agency to do good in the absence of any divine, ecclesiastical, or social directions. This is a true agent of God: one who would do the same things Christ would do because that is the same way they feel about things.

Service in the Church is accomplished under the direction of the priesthood, but that does not lessen our position or opportunity as agents. In fact, by limiting the scope of our responsibilities, say, to a primary teacher, or to a member of the bishopric, a harmonious order is given to the Church, and we all still have an obligation to each other as fellow Saints, wherein we have many opportunities to do good works.

"Therefore, let every man stand in his own office, and labor in his own calling; and let not the head say unto the feet it hath no need of the feet; for without the feet how shall the body be able to stand? Also the body hath need of every member, that all may be edified together, that the system may be kept perfect" (D&C 84:109–110).

Within the scope of each of our callings, we can each "learn [our] duty, and ... act in the office in which [we are] appointed, in all diligence" (D&C 107:99). Then we will truly be wise and faithful servants.