



## FREE AGENCY AND CONFORMITY IN FAMILY LIFE

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The scriptures<sup>1</sup> and the teachings of the Church leaders about free agency indicate that man should pursue life according to free choice and on the assumption that he can and should use his intelligence, capabilities, experience, and knowledge to guide his choices toward effective personal and spiritual achievement. Man must be subject to alternatives if he is to learn the processes of making decisions and rendering sound judgments.

At the same time Mormonism charges all members with responsibility to teach, admonish, and in all appropriate ways influence the choices being made by their fellow men and particularly the choices of family members. When one possesses knowledge of an important truth he should sense some obligation to share his possession where it can be helpful or “saving” to another. Errors of effort will occur inevitably when one is charged to influence another while the appropriate methods for influencing are not fully known or specified. We, therefore, see individuals fulfilling the commandment to teach or to admonish, but, in their enthusiasm or ignorance, violating freedom of choice. The parental sense of responsibility to guide children effectively to lead righteous lives may be carried out in such a way that the child experiences only management and force instead of free choice.

The written and the spoken emphasis on responsibility for one’s fellow man, and particularly one’s family, places the parent (especially the father and husband) in a precarious position. If the father neglects his responsibility to teach his children, his salvation is in jeopardy; if he teaches and encourages his family members too vigorously or by inappropriate methods he infringes on the free agency which is essential for their sense of selfhood, and risks resistance and rebellion from them. The magnitude of the doctrinal position and the inherent dilemma of implementing the doctrine in practice emphasize the need for understanding the issues involved. Families need guidelines for interaction which can meet scriptural admonitions and instructions from the pulpit to teach and

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<sup>1</sup>Helaman 14:30; Doctrine and Covenants 29:29, 58:28; Moses 6:56, 3:17; 2nd Nephi 2:11, 2:15, 10:23; and Abraham 3:25.

instruct within the family unit, while, at the same time, each member of the family is permitted to exercise his free agency.

Marriage counselors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists have developed theoretical models for understanding and treating family disharmony. The models vary from a focus exclusively on the individual to a focus on the two partners together, on family units, or on groups of couples. Notwithstanding the varied models there is agreement that health, or marital adjustment, is enhanced if each marriage partner and each family member is permitted a freedom of functioning commensurate with the individual's experience, knowledge, and ability. To focus on the free agency aspect of family relationships is to focus on only one significant dimension, but this dimension touches on many, if not most, areas of family life.

### *FREE AGENCY IN HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONSHIPS*

The close, emotionally-laden relationship of husband and wife brings into clear focus the issue of individuality and freedom of choice. In such a close relationship there is an ever present possibility of one "taking over" the other. The nagging wife produces fear in the husband that his life will be taken over by her. The wife who lives with a dominating man lives in constant fear that she will be submerged as a person and be only an extension of the partner with a loss of her identity. These fears are amplified when a person is uncertain about himself or his individuality. A simple request for the husband to help with the evening dishes can seem like a threat of control and an effort of the wife to put her husband under her jurisdiction.

Husband-wife relationships must allow for individuality and identity enhancement as well as growth of the relationship or else a negative pattern will enter the marriage. A husband who demands that his preferences be honored regardless of the control, interference, or inconvenience it causes his wife, is denying to the wife the opportunity to express her individuality or choose what happens to her. One husband who came in for counseling said that he reserved the prerogative of managing his wife's life, including choice of her clothing and decisions about her hair style. It is little wonder that the wife resented him and was applying for divorce, an evidence of her frustration and feelings of being dominated and thwarted in her personality growth.

A case example of a young couple married five years and with two children illustrates how the issue of free agency can pose a problem. The first few months were happy, but when the honeymoon was over the husband preferred to limit his activities to work and watching television, with infrequent social activities or other diversion. When the wife expressed a desire to go out socially, the husband refused and gave his wife no vote about how their time or their money should be spent. The wife's role as perceived by the husband was mother and housekeeper. Her social activities, religious practices, participation in money management, and association with friends were dictated by the husband, who inappropriately assumed this prerogative. Because Mrs. W. had been raised in a home where she was given little or limited self-determination she had not often made choices and decisions. Her only major decision, to marry Mr. W., was more in rebellion against her parents' wishes than an uninhibited choice

of a marriage partner. With little experience in asserting herself and in making choices she had been willing to acquiesce to her husband's dominance and control for several years of marriage. Finally, the push within her to assert her own identity came to the fore and she ran counter to her parents and her husband in seeking professional help. The husband also became involved in the counseling, but the wife's continued frustration had killed her love and she was no longer able to tolerate the relationship. Had the wife achieved her identity while she lived at home or been allowed to in the marriage there would have been no need for the divorce which subsequently occurred.

Three essential conditions must be met if husband-wife relationships are to enhance free agency in the marriage relationship: (1) The spouse must be allowed and encouraged to express thoughts and feelings. Imposed inhibitions of expression produce frustration, rebellion, and anger. The helpful husband will not order his wife to "quit blubbering" if she is moved to tears, but will encourage expression of her feelings and discuss the cause of her unhappiness. (2) The ideas and expressions of feelings of the spouse must be given credence. Willingness to listen and to discuss ideas and reactions produces feelings of worth. Minimizing, criticizing, or ridiculing of someone's point of view leaves him with feelings of worthlessness and reactions of anger and resentment. (3) Family decisions must include the spouse's participation. Free agency is offended when either spouse proceeds on decisions or actions without consultation with the partner. Each partner needs a feeling that his thoughts are important and that he can express a choice about family activities. Better decisions are made when both partners participate in making them.

#### *FREE AGENCY IN PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS*

Parental eagerness to lead children in righteous patterns can easily and subtly result in essential denial to them of the rights of free agency. When the nine-year-old announces his intent to stay home to watch television instead of attending sacrament meeting, a real challenge exists for a parent to choose between the two principles of "teach thy child" and "allow your child free agency." If the parent conveys to the child that he cannot have a choice in such matters, the child somewhere will assert his right to be a free agent. A young Mormon soldier who had earned all his priesthood awards for faithful attendance began smoking, drinking and, in general, violating the rules and practices of the Church when he went into military service. The man's discussion of his early life disclosed a feeling that he had rarely been given a chance to decide things for himself. His church attendance was mainly because of parental pressure. The parents did not give him a feeling that he was a participant in the choices made. The discomfort he felt from being deprived of his free agency, coupled with poor judgment from lack of experience in making choices, resulted in his aberrant behavior, which nearly destroyed him as he searched for his privilege of being a free agent.

Capacity to render sound decisions through the process of free choice is not developed magically or quickly. This capacity is developed experientially day to day from early childhood to adulthood. The ego development of the child proceeds as he learns to experience his autonomy and learns first the right of

free choice and then the responsibility for making sound choices. The four-year-old child is capable of many choices and a wise parent will give him experiences which emphasize his free choice prerogative. If he inquires from his mother whether he should play with his wagon or in the sand pile the mother should emphasize his right to decide for himself and assure him he has the ability to make a good decision. Many experiences of making choices render less offensive the necessary decisions made for him by parents or others.

Parental responsibility is most challenging when the children are going through adolescence. Prior to that time there is some degree of tractableness in the child and he generally will follow the admonitions of the parents. The onset of adolescence for the child brings with it the "life or death" issues of how many rights and privileges he has. Many a child is psychologically and spiritually lost when striving for his identity and testing the limits of his free agency run him headlong into the parental responsibility to guide and direct.

The wise parent will acknowledge the child's right to make choices, then encourage, teach, and persuade the adolescent to evaluate carefully the choice he is making.

A guideline for fulfilling effective parental responsibility in child rearing is recognition of the child's two-fold need for knowing limits and for experiencing free agency. Each child needs some limits and controls on his behavior, but they must be consonant with the child's age, experience, knowledge, and ability. The child must also have increasing experience in exercising his privilege of being a free agent. Should the limits and controls be too restrictive for the child at his age and level of maturity his energies will be used in efforts to circumvent, avoid, or destroy the limits. Should the limits be too extended the child may use his free choice in hurtful ways as he searches for the needed limits which serve as protection against his poor judgment, inexperience, or ignorance. Within the structure of appropriate controls, there needs to be opportunity for as many choices as feasible.

Five additional guidelines may help identify the parents' role in assuring appropriate levels of free agency to the child.

(1) Parents must listen with receptive minds to the words, meanings, and feelings of the child. When teenager Bill wants the car there is need for parental listening. A hasty "no" fails to reveal Bill's need to keep status with his friends or to share turns in providing the transportation to the corner ice cream store. Parental inquiry in a voice that shows willingness to listen and understand brings forth in Bill a reaction that he has a "friend in court" rather than an enemy intent on depriving him of privileges.

(2) The child's feelings and thoughts must be viewed as meaningful and important. Twelve-year-old Sally announces she no longer wishes to take piano lessons. Parental feelings of responsibility suggest encouragement and insistence that Sally continue her music. Allowance for free agency would permit her choice in the matter. Calm listening to Sally's thoughts and feelings gives self-respect to her and helps assess whether further pressures will bring forth a musician or a frustrated, rebellious child. Careful and thoughtful attention to Sally's concerns may suggest temporary cessation of lessons or even permanent discontinuance. Continuation with lessons even with moderate "pressure" has

allowed for Sally's feelings and thoughts which are the constituent elements of her free agency.

(3) The decision making process should involve the child as much as possible. Participation in decisions affecting one's self is a highly prized prerogative. The wise parent will encourage his child to express himself and think through the merits and disadvantages of his choices. Bill or Sally's activities or plans are most apt to come to fruition when they are participants in the decision making process.

(4) Adherence to the principle of alternatives is a helpful guideline for parents. Sally's feelings about her music lessons will be negative if she feels she has no alternative but to pursue them. She will be more cooperative about her situation if there are alternative plans to consider. Other activities for personal growth may be more suitable for Sally. Art lessons or special classes in an area of interest may more appropriately meet Sally's interest and needs. Chances for success are improved if Sally's interest and vote are evident in the plans. Listing and discussing alternatives with Sally are preferable to issuing edicts.

(5) Another guideline for parents is to manifest a basic confidence in the child's ability to make good choices. Trust and confidence that good choices will be made are most apt to help bring them about. Becky is most apt to behave properly on a date when parents express confidence in her judgment. If Becky feels her parents do not trust her and expect her to do wrong, the chances are increased this will be the outcome. Conversely, feelings of trust and confidence in Becky's judgment about selection of boyfriends, time to come home from a date, how much time to spend studying, etc., will enhance the making of sound decisions and effective use of time. Making disparaging comments about previous errors is a common parental error.

The dignity and worth of each family member and his spiritual growth are enhanced when free agency is blended with authority in constructive ways. To teach and admonish is not to control and dictate; to be a free agent is not to have complete license for personal choice unrelated to a sense of responsibility for making good choices.

