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ments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things." (D&C 93:28.)

Obedience to the commandments must be the sole and essential condition determining our choices and thus determining our eternal life. Alma expressed it in a very clear way:

"I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he alloteth unto men according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.

"Yea, and I know that good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience." (Al. 29:4-5.)

### Future of the world

May we remember together to

"make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.

"Serve the Lord with gladness: . . . know ye that the Lord he is God: It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." (Ps. 100:1-3.) The future of the world is in the hands of the people, and following a living prophet today will determine our salvation. It is my prayer that, thanks to a great conference, we will make new resolutions so that we will be remembered forever and ever as one people who wanted to serve the Lord. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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### President N. Eldon Tanner

He to whom we have just listened is Elder Charles A. Didier, a member of the First Quorum of Seventy and Supervisor of the Europe West Area.

It will now be our privilege and pleasure to listen to President Ezra Taft Benson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve.

## President Ezra Taft Benson

President of the Council of the Twelve

My beloved brethren and sisters, humbly and gratefully I stand before you today. I thank the Lord for the eternal principle of freedom, free agency, the right choice. I cherish patriotism and love of country in all lands.

### Love the Constitution

This morning, I speak about the Constitution of the United States—that glorious standard raised up by the Founding Fathers. I want to pay tribute to those who laid the foundation of our Republic. I desire to bear testimony

concerning one of the most vital principles that makes the work of the founders timeless and inspired.

Every Latter-day Saint should love the inspired Constitution of the United States—a nation with a spiritual foundation and a prophetic history—which nation the Lord has declared to be his base of operations in these latter days.

The framers of the Constitution were men raised up by God to establish this foundation of our government, for so the Lord has declared by revelation in these words:

"I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of *wise men*

whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood." (D&C 101:80; italics added.)

### History of the Constitution

Yes, this is a land fertilized by the blood of patriots. During the struggle for independence, nearly 9,000 of the colonist forces were killed. Among those fifty-six patriots who had pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor by signing the Declaration of Independence, at least nine paid that price with their life's blood.

At the close of the Revolution, the thirteen states found themselves independent but then faced grave internal economic and political problems. The Articles of Confederation had been adopted but proved to be ineffectual. Under this instrument, the nation was without a president, a head. There was a congress, but it was a body destitute of any power. There was no supreme court. The states were merely a confederation.

Washington wrote of the defects of this loose federation in these words: "The fabric which took nine years, at the expense of much blood and treasure to rear, now totters to the foundation, and without support must soon fall." (John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of George Washington*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939, 29:68.) Because of this crisis, fifty-five of the seventy-four appointed delegates reported to the convention, representing every state except Rhode Island, for the purpose of forming "a more perfect union." Thirty-nine finally signed the Constitution.

### The 39 delegates

Who were these delegates, those whom the Lord designated "wise men" whom *he* raised up? They were mostly young men in the prime of their life, their average age being forty-four. Benjamin Franklin was the eldest at

eighty-one. George Washington, the presiding officer at the convention, was fifty-five. Alexander Hamilton was only thirty-two; James Madison, who recorded the proceedings of the convention with his remarkable *Notes*, was only thirty-six. These were young men, but men of exceptional character, "sober, seasoned, distinguished men of affairs, drawn from various walks of life." (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, Deseret Book Co., 1965, p. 135.)

Of the thirty-nine signers, twenty-one of them were educated in the leading American colleges and in Great Britain; eighteen were, or had been, lawyers or judges; twenty-six had seen service in the Continental Congress; nineteen had served in the Revolutionary army, seventeen as officers. Four had been on Washington's personal staff during the war. Among that assembly of the thirty-nine signers were to be found two future presidents of the United States, one the "Father of his Country"; a vice-president of the United States; a secretary of the treasury; a secretary of war; a secretary of state; two chief justices of the Supreme Court, and three who served as justices; and the venerable Franklin, a diplomat, philosopher, scientist, and statesman.

"They were not backwoodsmen from far-off frontiers, not one of them. . . . *There has not been another such group of men in all [the 200 years of our history] that even challenged the supremacy of this group.*" (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Conference Reports*, April 1957, p. 47.) President Wilford Woodruff said they "were the *best spirits* the God of heaven could find on the face of the earth. They were choice spirits. . . ." (Wilford Woodruff, *Cr.*, April 1898, p. 89; italics added.)

### Ratification

Following the drafting of the Constitution, it awaited ratification by

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the states. In 1787 three states ratified the Constitution. In the next year eight more followed; and on April 6, 1789, 187 years ago today, the Constitution of the United States went into operation as the basic law of the United States when the electoral college unanimously elected George Washington as the first president of the nation. This date, I believe, was not accidental.

In the final analysis, what the framers did, under the inspiration of God, was to draft a document that merited the approval of God himself, who declared it to "be maintained for the rights and protection of *all* flesh." (D&C 101:77; italics added.)

### Criticism refuted

The document has been criticized by some as outmoded, and even a recent president of the United States criticized it as a document "written for an entirely different period in our nation's history." (*U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 17, 1962, p. 104.) The eminent Constitutional authority, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., has answered this argument in these words:

"These were the horse and buggy days as they have been called in derision; these were the men who traveled in the horsedrawn buggies and on horseback; but these were the men who carried under their hats, as they rode in the buggies and on their horses, a political wisdom garnered from the ages." (*Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, p. 136.)

What those framers did can be better appreciated when it is considered that when the instrument went into operation, it covered only thirteen states with fewer than four million people. Today it adequately covers fifty states and over 200 million people.

### Checks and balances

The wisdom of these delegates is shown in the genius of the document it-

self. The founders had a strong distrust for centralized power in a federal government. So they created a government with checks and balances. This was to prevent any branch of the government from becoming too powerful.

Congress could pass laws, but the president could check this with a veto. Congress, however, could override the veto, and by its means of initiative in taxation, could further restrain the executive department. The Supreme Court could nullify laws passed by the Congress and signed by the president. But Congress could limit the Court's appellate jurisdiction. The president could appoint judges for their lifetime with the consent of the Senate.

Each branch of the government was also made subject to different political pressures. The president was to be chosen by electors, Senators by state legislatures, representatives by the people, and the Supreme Court by the president, with the consent of the Senate.

All this was deliberately designed to make it difficult for a majority of the people to control the government and to place restraints on the government itself. The founders created a republic which Jefferson described as "action by the citizens in person in affairs within their reach and competence, and in *all others by representatives. . .*" (Paul L. Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, New York: J. P. Putnam Sons, 1905, 11:523.)

### Righteousness necessary

A study of the basic principles which undergird the document would be profitable for all Americans during this Bicentennial year.

When James Russell Lowell was asked, "How long will the American Republic endure?" he replied: "As long as the ideas of the men who founded it continue dominant." May I comment

on one of the most vital ideas and principles.

Constitutional government, as designed by the framers, will survive only with a righteous people. "Our Constitution," said John Adams, first vice-president and second president, "was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." (John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 189.)

America, North and South, is a choice land, a land reserved for God's own purposes. This land and its inhabitants are under an everlasting decree. The Lord revealed this decree to the brother of Jared, an American prophet, in these solemn words:

#### "A choice land"

"And now, we can behold the decrees of God concerning this land, that it is a land of promise; and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall serve God, or they shall be swept off when the fulness of his wrath shall come upon them. And the fulness of his wrath cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity.

"For behold, this is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off; for it is the everlasting decree of God. . . .

"Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ. . . ." (Eth. 2:9, 10, 12.)

The Lord has also decreed that this land should be "the place of the New Jerusalem, which should come down out of heaven, . . . the holy sanctuary of the Lord." (Eth. 13:3.) Here is our nation's destiny! To serve God's eternal purposes and to prepare this land and people for America's eventual destiny,

the Lord established the Constitution of this land by the hands of wise men whom we raised up to this very purpose. (See D&C 101:80.)

#### Exhortation of Abraham Lincoln

Many Americans have lost sight of the truth that righteousness is the one indispensable ingredient to liberty. Perhaps as never before in our history is our nation collectively deserving of the indictment pronounced by Abraham Lincoln in these words:

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

"It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the Offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." ("A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America," March 30, 1863, as cited in Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Washington, D.C.: United States Congress, 1897, pp. 164-65.)

#### Foresake sin

Unless we as citizens of this nation forsake our sins, political and otherwise, and return to the fundamental principles of Christianity and of constitutional government, we will lose our political liberties, our free institutions, and will stand in jeopardy before God

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of losing our exaltation. I am in full agreement with the statement made by President J. Reuben Clark, Jr.:

"I say to you that the price of liberty is and always has been blood, human blood, and if our liberties are lost, we shall never regain them except at the price of blood. They must not be lost!" (*Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, p. 137.)

Yes, I repeat, righteousness is an indispensable ingredient to liberty. Virtuous people elect wise and good representatives. Good representatives make good laws and then wisely administer them. This tends to preserve righteousness. An unvirtuous citizenry tend to elect representatives who will pander to their covetous lustings. The burden of self-government is a great responsibility. It calls for restraint, righteousness, responsibility, and reliance upon God. It is a truism from the Lord that "when the wicked rule the people mourn." (D&C 98:9.)

### Honest and wise men

As presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington appealed to the delegates in these words: "Let us raise a standard to which the *wise* and the *honest* can repair." Wise and honorable men raised that glorious standard for this nation. It will also take wise and honorable men to perpetuate what was so nobly established.

A citizen of this republic cannot do his duty and be an idle spectator. How appropriate and vital it is at the time of our nation's 200th birthday to remember this counsel from the Lord:

"*Honest* men and *wise* men should be sought for diligently, and good men and wise men ye should observe to uphold." (D&C 98:10.)

Goodness, wisdom, and honesty are the three qualities of statesmanship, qualities this country needs more than ever before. May we be wise—prayerfully wise—in the electing of those who

would lead us. May we select only those who understand and will adhere to Constitutional principles. To do so, we need to understand these principles ourselves.

### Reflect on Constitution

In 1973 the First Presidency of the Church made public this statement:

"We urge members of the Church and all Americans to begin now to reflect more intently on the meaning and importance of the Constitution, and of adherence to its principles." (ENSIGN, Nov. 1973, p. 90.)

May I urge every Latter-day Saint and all Americans in North and South America to become familiar with every part of this document. Many of the constitutions of countries in South America have been patterned in large measure after that of the United States. We should understand the Constitution as the founders meant that it should be understood. We can do this by reading their words about it, such as those contained in the Federalist Papers. Such understanding is essential if we are to preserve what God has given us.

### A sacred document

I reverence the Constitution of the United States as a sacred document. To me its words are akin to the revelations of God, for God has placed his stamp of approval on the Constitution of this land. I testify that the God of heaven selected and sent some of his choicest spirits to lay the foundation of this government as a prologue to the restoration of the gospel and the second coming of our Savior.

May God bless us to protect this sacred instrument. In the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith, "May those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever." (D&C 109:54.) For this I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.