

The Church and the American Bicentennial

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Students of this great Brigham Young University, how delighted I am to be with you here today. Today we especially salute our native Americans on this special commemoration of your Indian Week. We recognize the great contribution you've made to America's culture. We express our love and appreciation to you, and we are proud to call you "brother" and "sister" as we embrace and shake hands in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The subject I have selected to speak on today should be of interest to you as well as to all of us who have heritage in this great land of America. I was in the process of gathering some thoughts together for this talk and received a phone call from my daughter Gay. She gave me instructions not to speak on a Bicentennial theme. She said, "You're becoming trite. What will happen after the Fourth of July? No one will ever want you to speak again!" But today when she saw me wearing my Bicentennial tie, she said, "I guess I failed." Her idea was to have an entertaining talk—one that had a number of stories. But I had a great and strong impression on the subject that I'm to speak to you about today, and, Gay, I'm afraid I can't follow your counsel and advice.

Only two years ago I was given a major responsibility, and as these last two years have progressed I believe I'm beginning to

understand the magnitude of this assignment. I want to be very specific with you today. I want to talk straightforwardly to you about my feelings concerning America. I want you to understand how I feel about the assignment I have been given, but I especially want to enlist your help in assisting me in its fulfillment.

The Church's Expectations of BYU Students

I realize the power of the great body I'm before today. It is the best-trained, the best-equipped generation the world has ever known. Adding to this the tremendous investment the Church is making in your education, I suddenly realize the power of *you* in the world in which you live.

I've had the privilege, as President Oaks knows all too well, of sitting on the budget committee for the last little while. I am rapidly becoming aware of the great pressures the Church has on its resources. The demand is always a hundredfold more than the supply. I suppose this condition will never change in a growing and expanding church. Even with

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all of the great pressures of buildings, travel, supplies, translation, education, programs, communication, and others, the Church in its priorities has agreed to invest its sacred tithing funds fifteen times greater in you than it does for the average member of the Church.

The sacrifice of these members of the Church to pay their tithes and offerings has become more meaningful to me in the last few weeks. I was assigned to divide a stake just a couple of weeks ago in a country south of here. In the process of issuing a call to a stake president, the man the Lord had selected to serve, I saw him almost break into tears when the call was extended to him. He explained that he knew the call was coming. He said with a sad heart, as he assumed this heavy burden, that he knew the sacrifice he and his family would have to make. Then he went on to explain that right now one day's salary in every month is required just to transport his children, his family, back and forth to church as they pay their fare on the bus. Now with this additional assignment, added bus fare would be needed to attend more meetings. Then he continued to say that he would gladly and willingly accept the call, for he was anxious to build the kingdom and to make whatever sacrifice the Lord would require of him. He knew his family would sustain him in this sacrifice. My eyes glanced down, then, at this point, to the tithing record that was before me, and I found his contributions marked "paid in full." Suddenly I realized that this great and devoted, humble servant was making enormous sacrifices through the payment of his tithes to help my children have an education at this great institution. Literally the widow's mite is being supplied you to give you an education at this school. The members of the Church have a right to expect high performance out of you. This institution must be the best in all the land; for the tithing funds, the Lord's funds, are sustaining and supporting it. Throughout the

Church there is great love and high expectation for your performance as your education continues and as you go forward, leaving the institution to go out into the world and make your contribution.

Challenges for America's Future

In contrast to you great people I see before me today, I look around this great land of the free in which we are living and find some very definite signs of the decay that is beginning to occur. Corruption, crime, dishonesty, immorality, pollution, laziness, devotion only to special interests are signs which precede the fall. We see so much evidence of these signs before our eyes in the civilization in which we live. These have marked the downfall of mighty nations before ours. I realize the promise which has been given to us in this great land. I also remember the prophecies concerning our responsibilities to preserve that which God has blessed us with. The Lord has promised us—through testimonies of two or three—to sustain the truth on this land. Our responsibilities to this land have been testified to by a much larger number than that, but for the sake of the record I give you three special witnesses who have indicated our responsibilities to the land of America.

The first witness I would call for would be Brigham Young, who said: "Will the Constitution be destroyed? No: It will be held inviolate by this people"; and, as Joseph Smith said, "The time will come when the destiny of this nation will hang upon a single thread. At that critical juncture, this people will step forth and save it from the threatened destruction. It will be so" (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:15).

Now the second witness, John Taylor: "When the people have torn to shreds the Constitution of the United States the Elders of Israel will be found holding it up to the nations of the earth and proclaiming liberty and equal rights to all men, and extending the hand of fellowship to the oppressed of all nations.

This is part of the program" (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:8).

The third witness is from George Q. Cannon, former member of the First Presidency: "The day will come when the Constitution and free government under it will be sustained and preserved by this people" (*Gospel Truth*, vol. 2, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974]). Now, I declare to you today that if we are not in the beginning stages of the fulfillment of this prophecy, we are at least in the stages where we're preparing for its fulfillment.

The Church's Bicentennial Message

Now at this critical stage in our nation's history, suddenly we find ourselves with a great opportunity to reverse the trend and help chart the course of this country back toward righteousness. We have just concluded printing a document for the Church to be issued to all of the Church who are interested in it. It contains our message to our country during this Bicentennial year. The title of our message is "God's Hand in the Founding of America." As a part of this effort we have commissioned the painting of seven specific posters which are now being printed to become part of a poster series to tell our message to the nation. It is anticipated that this poster series will be used in every building that we have in the United States during the year of 1976, and those who visit our buildings who are not of our faith will have an opportunity of hearing our message through this series. I would like you to become partly familiar with this message. I would like you to know it so that you can have an opportunity of declaring it as we go forward in 1976. Could I tell you about and walk you through these documents, to see what they contain? First let me introduce you to this poster series.

The Bicentennial effort of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is communicated in three unique messages to America.

The messages are these: first, that America's early history began more than two thousand years ago and is contained in an ancient and sacred record called the Book of Mormon; second, that the discovery of America and the establishment of the United States was a part of God's plan and was brought about by men who were inspired and guided by God; and finally, that America's future destiny is dependent on the righteousness and morality of her families.

Why is it so important to know and understand America's past? Because in that past are the important lessons and warnings for today: lessons about God and his interest in the affairs of men, warnings in the form of destructions that came to early American civilizations when they lost their reverence for family or morality and for God. Why are these messages particularly important during the Bicentennial year? Because the only true way to celebrate the Bicentennial is in the same spirit that prevailed two hundred years ago—a spirit of control over the earth and man's dependency on Jesus the Christ.

Seven Scenes from America's History

Now imagine being in a chapel with these seven posters before you. I take you to the first one. It's entitled "Ancient America." Then in a narrative we would explain what this poster means. Archaeologists have now confirmed the existence of a great pre-Aztec civilization on the American continent. The Book of Mormon is a record of this civilization, beginning some six hundred years before Christ when a man named Lehi left Jerusalem and came by boat to the Americas. The book was originally written by these ancient people on sheets of gold. Lehi's son Nephi was a great prophet who foresaw much of what would happen in the future of this new land. He foresaw a time after Christ's resurrection when the Son of God would appear here in America: "I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God

descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them" (1 Nephi 12:6). He foresaw an apostasy later on, both here and in the Old World when "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious" (1 Nephi 13:26). Nephi also saw the destruction of this early American civilization and a later rediscovery of this land by an inspired explorer: "And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land" (1 Nephi 12:12). Finally he foresaw the restoration here on this land of the fulness of the gospel. "These last records . . . shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them" (1 Nephi 12:40), he testifies. The Book of Mormon history concerning the children of Lehi extends back ten times farther than that which we celebrate in the Bicentennial, and twenty times farther concerning those who followed the brother of Jared, a record also contained in the Book of Mormon to this land of liberty. Our evidence is overwhelming of God's hand in the establishment of this nation and his dealings with mankind both when they were righteous and when they became wicked.

Now the second poster. We take you to one showing Christ in America. The greatest event recorded in the Book of Mormon was the visit of Jesus Christ to America shortly after his resurrection. The Book of Mormon thus becomes a second witness to the divinity of the Son of God. Mormons use both the Bible and the Book of Mormon, believing that they are both ancient and sacred writings, one from the Old World and one from the New World. The last part of the Book of Mormon recounts a great war that virtually destroyed ancient American civilization. In order to preserve their history,

which had been recorded on plates of gold, they buried the record in the earth. The man who abridged and summarized these records just prior to the destruction of this people was named Mormon—hence the name "The Book of Mormon." It was Mormon's son Moroni who buried the plates. Before doing so, he made this prophecy to all who would read the book today:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. [Moroni 10:4–5]

Now step with me to the third poster, "America Rediscovered." Centuries passed before America was rediscovered. The Lord inspired the thinking and guided the sailing of a man, Christopher Columbus, who on several occasions gave credit to the Almighty. In writing to the Spanish leaders, Columbus said, "Our Lord unlocked my mind, set me upon the sea, and gave me fire for the deed. Those who heard of my enterprise called it foolish, mocked me, and laughed. But who can doubt but that the Holy Ghost inspired me?" During the voyage, after weeks of sailing with no land in sight, mutiny raised its head. Finally Columbus promised the captains of the two other ships that they would turn back if land was not sighted in forty-eight hours. Then he went to his cabin and in his words "prayed mightily to the Lord." On October 12, the very next day, they sighted land. We believe a land of liberty and religious freedom was a necessary ingredient in the plan of God; thus, Columbus and others, particularly those seeking religious freedom, were led to the shores of America.

Now the fourth in the poster series, entitled “Men Raised Up.” The success of the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War came through men who were raised up by God for this very special purpose. One must merely read the Declaration of Independence to feel its inspiration. One must merely study history to know that to defeat the world’s most powerful country by a group of fledgling colonies was a result of a force greater than man. Where else in the world do we find a group of men together in one place at one time who possessed greater capacity and wisdom than did the founding fathers—Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and others? But it was not to their own abilities that they gave the credit. They acknowledged Almighty God and were certain of the impossibility of their success without his help. Benjamin Franklin, one of these, made an appeal for daily prayers in the Constitutional Convention. In that appeal he said, “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? . . . and I also believe that without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the building of Babel” (James Parton, *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* [Boston: J. R. Osgood Co., 1864], 2:574).

Now the fifth poster. “Inspired Documents” is its title. No constitution on earth has endured longer than ours. We seek and usually find the answers to today’s hardest legal questions within this document of yesterday. The Constitution was and is a miracle. Both Washington and Madison refer to it as such. It was an inspired document, written under the divine guidance of the Lord. James Madison, commonly called the Father of the Constitution, recognized this inspiration and gave credit to “the guardianship and guidance of the Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously displayed to this rising

republic” (First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1809).

We believe that the Constitution was brought about by God to insure a nation where liberty could abound, where his gospel could flourish. Joseph Smith said, “Hence we say, that the Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 147). Again from Brigham Young, “The General Constitution . . . was dictated by the invisible operations of the Almighty” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:13). From our current living prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, “One of the reasons America is great today is because those men who formulated the Constitution had vision. They looked ahead to this day and all of us here are recipients of their wisdom and foresight” (Lecture at Dixie College, 25 April 1975). Among other things, the Constitution guarantees the religious freedom that allowed the Reformation to continue and flourish. The great reformers in this land began to throw off the rituals and dogmas that had been attached to Christianity during the Dark Ages and sought to return to the pure and simple truths of the New Testament.

Now the sixth poster, one very interesting to us, entitled “The Gospel Restored.” Many of the great reformers stated that their efforts were to assert basic Christian teachings of the Bible, but they acknowledged that they possessed no authority to administer to the ordinances of the Church or to reestablish the original church of Jesus Christ. Luther said, “I simply say that Christianity has ceased to exist among those who should have preserved it . . .” (In Galat. [1535] Weins IX, P. I. 293, 24–27, p. 50; *Luther and His Times*, p. 509; John M. Todd, *Martin Luther, A Biographical Study* [Westminster: The Newman Press, 1964], p. 188). Roger Williams came to the conclusion that there is “no regularly constituted Church on earth, nor any person authorized to

administer any Church ordinances” (*Picturesque America*, p. 502). We believe that both America’s freedom and the continuing reformation that flourished here occurred in preparation for the restoration from heaven of the full gospel of Jesus Christ. That restoration took place in the 1820s through a man named Joseph Smith. We believe that God and his son Jesus Christ appeared to the Prophet, who described his vision in these words, “I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” (Joseph Smith 2:17). An important part of the Restoration was the return of the priesthood or the power of God. This was restored to Joseph by Peter, James, and John, who appeared as heavenly messengers and ordained Joseph Smith by the laying on of hands.

Another part of this Restoration was the revealing and translating of the record of the Book of Mormon. Joseph described the visit of Moroni, who also returned as a messenger, with these words: “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent. . . . He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants” (Joseph Smith 2:34). We believe that between the Book of Mormon and other things revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith the full and complete gospel of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has been restored to the earth.

Now let us go to the last poster, I guess the most important to us, because the title of this poster is “America’s Future.” Today we are fortunate to live in a choice and promised land. It will remain free and blessed as long as we, its people, remember the God who gave us life and gave us this free land. We must remember that the family is the basic unit of a strong society. We are all part of God’s family, and as our

Father he expects us to build strong family units. It is in our families that the basic morality and righteousness can be taught that will keep America free. Each member of every family plays an important role in America. Throughout this land for several thousand years of history the great fathers and mothers, the noble sons, the patriot sons, the choice daughters, have forged America into what we have today.

It is America’s conscience that has preserved her. America is beautiful only when she is good, when her children are laughing in her streets and her love abounds in her families. Without this conscience civilization crumbles, as it has before on this continent. We are all part of America’s future. Our job is to remember the lessons of the past, to patch up mistakes and the sins of everything that has gone before. The place to start is within our own families, and as we have counseled, “No success can compensate for failure in the home.” That’s where we want to leave these people who come and have an opportunity of hearing our message, the most important message that will be taught during our Bicentennial year.

America’s Greatness Based on Righteousness

The source of America’s greatness is not a new doctrine to us. The Book of Mormon has declared over and over again that the blessings of heaven are contingent upon the righteousness of its people. In fact, this teaching has been attested to in almost every age. Remember in 1831 when the famous French historian Alexis de Tocqueville said:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world of commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I

understand her genius and power. America is great because she is good. If America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

In summary, I have attempted to again remind you of *your* responsibility to preserve the righteousness of the land of America. I have reviewed four thousand years of history, declaring this to be a land of promise, chosen of the Lord for his special purposes. Now we must deal with America's future. America must continue to remain strong and great and good. It is destined to be the major supplier of human and financial resources, to build the kingdom of God here in the whole world, and to prepare the world for the return of the Lord and Savior. The adversary knows all too well that a weak America will literally stop this building process and thwart the work of God.

I hope I have painted a picture clear enough for you to see today your role in this great eternal process. The Lord is making his major investment in *you*, of all people on earth. In my dealings with the Lord I have found him to be one who expects performance, from the very beginning in supplying Adam and Eve with the potential to fulfill their needs. Remember his first command to them was to multiply, replenish, have dominion over, and subdue (see Genesis 1:28). They were not placed in the Garden of Eden just to have a comfortable life or to enjoy the benefits of the labors that he'd provided for them, but to accomplish, to do. He is the supplier of resources and, in turn, expects performance out of us. Is it not reasonable, knowing the history as we do of his dealings with mankind, to think that he would expect a special performance out of you because of the high investments he is presently making in you in your education here at this institution? I think he expects that of you because of that investment.

John Adams understood the potential of a righteous government when he wrote:

Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible as their only law book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited. Every member would be obligated in conscience to temperance and frugality and industry, to justice and kindness and charity toward his fellowmen, and to piety, love, and reverence toward Almighty God. In this commonwealth no man would impair his health with gluttony, drunkenness or lust. No man would sacrifice his precious time to cards or trifling with other mean amusements. No man would steal or lie or in any way defraud his neighbor, but would live in peace and goodwill toward all men. No man would blaspheme his Maker or profane his worship, but a rational and manly, a sincere and unaffected devotion would reign in the hearts of all men. What a utopia, what a paradise this region would be. [Diary and Autobiography of John Adams (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1961), vol. 1, Diary 1755–1770]

As I stand before you today, I want to issue you a challenge. I want you who are the best trained, the best educated, who have been given these great advantages here in America to literally become the conscience of America and the molders of its destiny and future. With your knowledge, your training, your understanding of how God works in the hearts of his children here on earth, may you obligate yourselves to temperance, to frugality, and to industry. Let us all show justice, kindness, and charity toward our fellowmen. Let us demonstrate the love and reverence we should exhibit toward our Almighty God. Let us not trifle with the things that are holy to God.

Fifty-six men represented 2.5 million in 1776 to bring about a new nation which has literally blessed the whole world. That was one man to every forty-five thousand, at that time. Today I'm calling on twenty-five thousand to exert an influence over about 250 million people in this land. The odds are even better for you. The advantage is on your side, for you only have

one for every ten thousand. This is the time for you to be bold enough to stand up for what you believe, to let the world know that God still blesses this great land of America—if we will live righteously, according to that which he has commanded.

Will God bless us that we may have the courage to fulfill our responsibility here. I know by personal experience during these

last two years that the heavens are still open, that he still does direct his work here. That message should ring from the hilltops to this nation during its Bicentennial. May you have the courage with me to stand up and be counted with those who would preserve this land of the free through the righteousness of its people, I humbly pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.