

Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies

Volume 4 | Number 1

Article 4

2012

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Recommended Citation

Bray, Justin R. "Excessive Formalities in the Mormon Sacrament, 1928–1940." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012). <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol4/iss1/4>

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Justin R. Bray

EXCESSIVE FORMALITIES IN THE MORMON SACRAMENT, 1928–1940

“We are not a people who look to formality, certainly we do not believe in phylacteries, in uniforms, on sacred occasions.”¹

There has been perhaps no sacred rite more familiar and fundamental in all of Christendom than the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Similarly, in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (‘the Church’), partaking of bread and wine (or water) has been a tangible pledge of remembrance and discipleship of Jesus Christ since it was first performed at the church’s organization in 1830. Since then, communicants have literally raised a glass to the life, teachings, and mission of their Messiah.

Eventually, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, young men, charged with the responsibility to distribute the sacramental emblems throughout Mormon congregations, became somewhat sluggish in the manner in which they fulfilled their duty, especially in their dress. They came to worship services in “a motley array of vividly colored sweaters, seldom pressed coats, and shirt sleeves of vary-

1. David O. McKay, *Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1956, 89.

ing degrees of color and cleanliness.”² Their appearance and attitude toward the sacrament caused more seasoned members of the church to question the boys’ maturity and to impose strict stipulations, including the use of uniforms, upon those who distributed the bread and water. These members hoped that the new rules would instill in the boys a sense of respect for the sacred ordinance.

This paper is an effort to understand the effect of uniforms and other rigid regulations on young men distributing the bread and water in Mormon sacrament services in the early 1930s, the concern of excessive formalities during the Lord’s Supper on the part of the Church’s highest authorities, and the lasting impact of local LDS congregations on the general administration of the sacrament.

BACKGROUND

Nowadays, the administration of the Lord’s Supper is a duty of the Aaronic Priesthood, the lesser of two priesthoods in the Mormon Church. Worthy young men are ordained to the office of Deacon in the Aaronic Priesthood at age twelve and are commissioned to pass the bread and water each Sunday in LDS congregations. However, twelve-year-old boys did not always assume such important pastoral responsibilities in the Church. For the first seventy years since its inception, leaders entrusted older men of the higher, Melchizedek Priesthood with the task to distribute the emblems in sacrament services. The transition from men to boys, according to William G. Hartley, professor emeritus of history at Brigham Young University, was part of a “greater interest in youth that was sweeping the nation as part of the Progressive Movement (1890–1920).”³

Although the Mormon Church has historically been a top-down organization in terms of policies and procedures for its members, local leaders seemed to have had a hand in introducing new ideas during the Progressive Era. For example, weekly family nights, visitors centers, individual sacrament cups,

2. Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36:4 (April 1933): 361.

3. William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2010), 59.

meetinghouse janitors, missionary farewells, and the Church Education System, were all ideas that began on the local level before being sanctioned by the general authorities of the church and adopted worldwide.

Having young men receive the Aaronic Priesthood and participate in the administration of the Lord's Supper was no different. The idea began among local congregations throughout Utah, particularly in St. George and Salt Lake City. In 1908, Joseph F. Smith, President of the LDS Church, officially turned the administration of the sacrament over to the young men. He wanted to give the boys "something to do that will make them interested in the work of the Lord."⁴

As mentioned, the decision to give the young men more responsibility in the Mormon Church came at a time of increasing concern for the well-being of youth in America, due to the rise of several social problems including drunkenness, sexual indulgence, and other forms of immoral and unruly behavior. Church leaders believed athletics, scouting, and other youth programs were the best way to avert juvenile delinquency.⁵ However, the challenge of protecting youth only intensified throughout the 1920s and into the Great Depression.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Like most Americans, members of the Mormon Church faced severe economic challenges throughout the 1930s. At one point, the unemployment rate in Utah reached thirty-five percent—fourth highest in the nation. In 1933, the annual income per capita in Utah fell to a mere \$300, causing some desperate families to sit down to a "lunchpail meal of potato peels."⁶ Frustrated Utahans protested at the capitol building in Salt Lake City until the fire department literally hosed them away.⁷ Eventually, the church aided those in need by organizing several

4. "Editor's Table," *Improvement Era* 11:7 (May 1908): 550.

5. Richard Ian Kimball, *Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1890–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

6. Jason Swenson, "'Hard Times' Can Forge Faith," *Church News*, 30 May 2009, 2.

7. Thomas G. Alexander, *Utah: The Right Place* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2003), 311–312.

programs, including employment bureaus, storehouses, and welfare services.

The depression had a significant effect on Mormon priesthood holders' church attendance. During such periods of financial stress many were "away from home seeking work."⁸ Not only were adult, Melchizedek Priesthood-holding men away, but young men as well. Retaining deacons during the summer months was particularly difficult since their quorum meetings were "adjourned" during the irrigation season in order for them to work in the fields and harvest sugar beets and other crops.⁹ It was not uncommon to discontinue Aaronic Priesthood meetings when the academic school year ended in the spring. In fact, during the summer months between 1928 and 1932, the highest attendance in a single deacons quorum throughout the entire church was thirty-two percent.¹⁰ The average hovered around ten percent.

While on leave from quorum meetings, adults working with the young men questioned the spiritual safety of deacons and believed that they were more susceptible to "character-destroying forces."¹¹ Often referred to as the "summer slump," many deacons developed habits of drinking liquor and chewing tobacco, which were contrary to church standards, and they resumed quorum meetings in the fall, which were more troublesome than before.¹²

This sense of youthful immaturity was evident while deacons distributed the bread and water throughout Mormon congregations. Not only were they careless in their dress and appearance, wearing tattered, unwashed, wrinkled shirts and coats, but the deacons also talked, whispered, snickered, and made "other unnecessary noises" during the administration of the sacrament; others would point fingers, chew gum, doze off, twist nervously, or "hitch at [their] trousers every half

8. "Quorum Attendance to be Stressed," *Improvement Era* 37:2 (February 1934): 105.

9. "Summer Meetings of Aaronic Priesthood," *Improvement Era* 37:5 (May 1934): 295. See various "Aaronic Priesthood" sections in the *Improvement Era* throughout the early 1930s.

10. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

11. "Summer Activity for Priesthood Quorums," *Improvement Era* 40:7 (July 1937): 448.

12. "Presiding Bishopric Inaugurates Campaign to Avert Summer Attendance Slump," *Improvement Era* 35:6 (April 1932): 357.

minute” throughout the meeting.¹³ Many left Sunday services early, immediately after passing the sacrament. Some deacons even used tobacco prior to sacrament services, causing parents to call for reform.¹⁴

These concerned members implemented ideas to revive attendance in deacons quorums attendance and stimulate interest in priesthood responsibilities. Some methods included holding one-on-one meetings between the local bishop and deacon, calling more engaging class instructors, and promoting social events. Surprisingly, uniforms—consisting of white shirts, black slacks, and bow ties—proved to be one of the most effective approaches in attracting and disciplining the deacons.

UNIFORMS

Earl Jay Glade, a Melchizedek Priesthood holder and a leader over the deacons of the Highland Park Ward, first introduced the “white shirt-black tie system” at a priesthood convention in Salt Lake City.¹⁵ According to Glade, uniforms were not “just any old shirt, any old sweater, [or] any old coat,” but rather identical white shirts and bow ties; he felt they were the solution for “building morale in deacon’s quorum work.”¹⁶ The idea of uniforms was received enthusiastically by other deacons quorum leaders and spread until a number of local ward units adopted their own uniform dress code for young men passing the sacrament.¹⁷

Although uniforms varied from ward to ward, bow ties became a distinctive characteristic of deacons quorums in the 1930s. Why bow ties? According to

13. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

14. “Field Notes,” *Improvement Era* 34:7 (May 1931): 417.

15. Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36:4 (April 1933): 361.

16. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

17. Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36:4 (April 1933): 361.



From *The Improvement Era*, April 1933. Photo courtesy the author.

Earl Jay Glade, matching bow ties would “do more to build morale and pride in organization-membership, than a 10,000 word lecture.”¹⁸

Studies in organizational behavior confirm the effect of uniforms. First, uniforms “elicit psychological processes that inspire compliance.”¹⁹ Thus, those who wear “organizationally designated attire are psychologically in a position of having complied with one organizational standard. Such employees can maintain cognitive consistency by fulfilling other organizational expectations.”²⁰ In other words, uniforms act as “situational cues” that de-individuate employees, bringing them to focus on, and fulfill, assignments related to the uniform. The individual often forgets personal preferences and concentrates on the job at hand when required to dress for work. “Once you put on that uniform . . . then you are certainly not the same person. You really become that role.”²¹

Second, uniforms legitimize the wearer to outsiders. For example, uniforms and badges set police officers apart from other citizens and enable them to enforce the law. Similarly, white shirts and bow ties helped to distinguish deacons from

18. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

19. Anat Rafaeli and Michael G. Pratt, “Tailored Meanings: On the Meaning and Impact of Organizational Dress,” *Academy of Management Review* 18:1 (January 1993): 44.

20. *The Stanford Prison Experience*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University, 1971 (Film), in Anat Rafaeli and Michael G. Pratt, “Tailored Meanings: On the Meaning and Impact of Organizational Dress,” *Academy of Management Review* 18:1 (January 1993): 44.

21. *Ibid.*

other young men and empower them, in the eyes of the congregation, to administer the sacrament.²²

The uniforms worked effectively; one ward that implemented a dress code immediately noticed “more reverence shown during the passing of the sacrament by the members as well as the boys themselves.”²³ This same ward found that a deacon had a “greater incentive to be courteous, thoughtful and orderly in the performance of his sacred duties” when all the deacons were dressed alike.²⁴ Other members not only witnessed an “increase of boys in attendance at Sunday School” after a dress code was imposed, but noted that the uniforms had “a wonderful effect on the boys eleven and twelve years of age. When they see these deacons they long to become a deacon.”²⁵ The success of the uniforms caused some adult priesthood leaders to incorporate “additional features” and rigid rules into the procedure of administering the Lord’s Supper.²⁶

“ADDITIONAL FEATURES”

Most of the new rules accompanying the inception of uniforms dealt with posture and invariability in the deacon’s walk and stance. For example, in some wards deacons were to simultaneously arise and strictly “march” to and from the sacrament table,²⁷ keeping the arms that handle the trays at right angles. While waiting for the tray to be returned to them at each row, the deacons were to “stand erect with arms folded in front of them,” in order to avoid distracting the congregation.²⁸

Many wards began to implement even more stringent and detail-attentive

22. *Ibid.*, 45.

23. “Uniforms in Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36:9 (September 1933): 687.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Fred J. Curtis, “The Importance of Activity in Aaronic Priesthood Quorums,” *Improvement Era* 36:2 (December 1932): 104.

26. “Avoid Formalism in Church Worship,” *Presiding Bishopric Bulletin*, February 1935, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

27. “Field Notes,” *Improvement Era* 34:7 (May 1931): 417

28. *Ibid.* See also “Regulations Regarding Passing the Sacrament,” *Improvement Era* 58:2 (February 1955): 113.



From *The Improvement Era*, June 1938. Photo courtesy the author.

rules. In some wards, the deacons lined up to receive specific assignments according to their height.²⁹ Others split up the passing of the bread and water between multiple quorums of deacons. Some wards became so exacting as to ban the crust of the bread from the sacrament so that “the pieces when broken shall be uniform in color and size.”³⁰ These rules, together with the uniforms, became known as the “military order” of administering the Lord’s Supper.³¹

One rule popularized in the 1930s, which is still a popular Mormon practice today, is the nonuse of the left hand when passing the bread and water. The Granite Stake was the first to publicize this directive in the *Improvement Era*, a church-distributed magazine. According to their instructions, the deacons were to take the tray by the right hand only and keep the left hand behind their backs “at all times.”³² The only explanation by the Granite Stake was that “it is not proper to have a boy handling the sacrament with the left hand.”³³

There is still uncertainty in the church about the appropriateness of using the left hand in the sacrament. Joseph Fielding Smith, Church Historian and influential LDS writer, aimed to clarify this matter. In 1946, Smith spoke against

29. Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36:4 (April 1933): 361.

30. William A. Hyde, “Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” *Improvement Era* 14:7 (May 1911): 578.

31. “Regulations Regarding Passing the Sacrament,” *Improvement Era* 58:2 (February 1955): 113.

32. “Field Notes,” *Improvement Era* 34:7 (May 1931): 417.

33. *Ibid.*

deacons with their “left hand plastered on their backs in a most awkward manner,” as well as the practice among members to cautiously take the sacrament only with the right hand.³⁴

However, almost a decade later, Smith insisted the sacrament be taken and passed by the right hand only—the right hand being “a symbol of righteousness.” He said, “The right hand or side is called the dexter and the left the sinister. Dexter connotes something favorable; sinister, something unfavorable or unfortunate. It is a well-established practice in the church to partake of the sacrament with the right hand and also to anoint with the right hand, according to the custom which the scriptures indicate is, and always was, approved by divine injunction.”³⁵

Interestingly, attendance in deacons quorums increased considerably in many wards at the time these strict instructions were taught to the young men. Wards consistently congratulated their deacons for perfect attendance through articles in the *Improvement Era* during the 1930s. Why did young men positively respond to such rules? Manton Moody of the Deseret Stake published an article in the *Improvement Era* about the deacons’ behavior and emphasized that young men “like to be noticed” and yearn for attention.³⁶ The extra regard for, and the strict rules imposed on, the deacons helped them sense the spotlight and “feel a little bigger,” thus building morale and inspiring them.³⁷ In essence, the deacons had a new identity. They were no longer the bottom of the priesthood totem pole; they had become the center of attention.

CONCERN OF FORMALISM

The matching shirts and bow ties were not the first uniforms popularized

34. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation, Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946), 103.

35. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1957), 154.

36. Manton Moody, “Means of Success in Promoting Attendance of the Aaronic Priesthood,” *Improvement Era* 35, no. 5 (March 1932): 301.

37. *Ibid.*

by church members. In the mid-1910s, students at Brigham Young University sported class uniforms, consisting of various types of sweaters, blazers, hats, and collars. The original intent of uniforms on campus was to distinguish between, and create a sense of community among, different classes. However, by the mid-1920s the uniforms became a “craze for something exclusive.” Administrators at BYU felt too much attention went toward dress and grooming instead of study, and the uniforms were soon dropped.³⁸ Similarly, it was thought by some that deacon uniforms drew attention away from their main objective and led to further procedural changes in the administration of the sacrament.

Interestingly, however, according to Earl Jay Glade, uniforms were not only “encouraged by many prominent church leaders” at first, but they also received “recommendation by authorities for general adoption.”³⁹ As a matter of fact, the priesthood convention at which Glade first spoke about matching dress for deacons was conducted by Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon, with Joseph F. Merrill and Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles presiding. These were some of the highest authorities over the general work of young men in the church, and they initially “expressed their approval”⁴⁰ of this new method of officiating the sacrament. However, over time they grew wary of established customs in the sacred ordinance when matching outfits became mandatory in order to pass the bread and water in some wards.⁴¹

Robert L. Simpson, a notable member of the church who served as a counselor in the Presiding Bishopric and member of the First Quorum of the Seventy—both of which are appointments which confer authority for general governance of the Church—spoke at a Brigham Young University convocation and related his experience as a deacon in the early 1930s. His story illustrates the mores of sacrament administration during that time:

38. Gary Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 107.

39. Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” *Improvement Era* 36, no. 6 (April 1933): 361.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

Our new chapel had just been dedicated. It was beautiful. We were so proud. We even had a separate sacrament alcove behind the bishopric seats on the stand. Bit by bit we tried to enhance our sacrament service. Red velour drapes were installed to be drawn apart at the precise psychological moment. Smaller drapes revealing a picture of the Last Supper were drawn just before the sacrament prayers were given. All of the deacons wore white shirts and black bow ties. And last but not least, we had worked out a system of musical chimes to signal the opening of the drapes and the sacrament prayers. It was the most beautiful and dramatic sacrament presentation ever devised in any dispensation. Even the stake president was impressed—so much so that he invited President Heber J. Grant to come and see the Church’s new ‘Hollywood’ version of the sacrament. President Grant accepted the invitation and witnessed what turned out to be our final presentation. We were taught in unmistakable, but kindly, terms what the sacrament service should be. I’ll never forget that lesson. It was valuable not only to me, but to everyone else in that ward and in that stake.⁴²

Although many adult members and deacons preferred uniforms and military order in the sacrament, the general officers of the church increasingly questioned these practices beginning in the late 1930s. Their message was clear: “Though white shirts and dark ties for the young men are proper, it should not be required that all be exactly alike in dress and general appearance. . . . Also, there should not be any requirement as to the posture or action while passing the sacrament, such as carrying the left hand behind the back or maintaining stiffness in walking or any tendency toward military order in action.”⁴³ The gen-

42. Robert L. Simpson, “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,” *Brigham Young University 1985-1986 Speeches*, 4, <http://speeches.byu.edu/index.php?act=viewitem&id=464>.

43. “Avoid Formalism in Church Worship,” *Presiding Bishopric Bulletin*, February 1935, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

eral authorities understood that “these changes and innovations are innocently adopted, but in course of time there is the danger that they will become fixed customs and considered as necessary to the welfare of the Church.”⁴⁴ In other words, they felt these supplements to the sacrament tended toward religious formalism.⁴⁵

Formalism meant worshipping with less regard to inner significance than to external forms. In essence, general authorities believed deacons and members wearing uniforms were more concerned with the outward appearance of those passing the emblems than the meaning of the sacred ordinance itself. Bishop Cannon understood the importance of “order, appropriateness, and reverence” in the sacrament, but cautioned in his monthly bulletin to avoid extreme formalities and uniformity in dress that “detract from the thought and purpose thereof.”⁴⁶ He further taught “the administration of the sacrament was to be quietly natural and unobtrusive.”⁴⁷ Joseph Fielding Smith warned against something even as small as formalism in the sacrament: “If we are not careful, we will find ourselves traveling the road that brought the Church of Jesus Christ in the first centuries into disrepute and paved the way for the apostasy.”⁴⁸

This was not the first time member-imposed formalities in the sacrament had caused a stir among the Latter-day Saints. In the 1890s, several general authorities spoke against entire congregations kneeling during the sacramental prayers, which had become a practice among some wards in Utah since their arrival in the 1850s and even more common after Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter preferred

44. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946), 103.

45. “Suggestions for Increasing Sacrament Meeting Attendance,” *Progress of the Church* 6, no. 2 (February 1943): 7.

46. “Avoid Formalism in Church Worship,” *Presiding Bishopric Bulletin*, February 1935, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946), 103.

“the kneeling posture.”⁴⁹ When the matter was brought up in one particular sacrament meeting, members of the congregation debated the issue until “contention on the part of some [became] very strong.” Joseph E. Taylor, counselor in the Salt Lake Stake presidency, recounted the reaction by those opposed to the change: “We have a great many brethren in the Church who are very technical on certain points, and who harp upon these technicalities to the disturbance of many individuals who are perfectly willing to remain satisfied with the examples that have been set in the Church by the highest authorities.”⁵⁰

Like the deacon uniforms and military order, general authorities feared that the “confusion and noise [in relation] to kneeling” by the whole congregation distracted members’ attention away from the sacrament, and that such procedures would become permanent components of the ordinance. Moreover, church leaders removed deacon uniforms before members became too attached to them, as they had with the kneeling practices.

By the early 1940s, most wards abandoned uniform dress for their deacons. Traces of bow ties lingered among some quorums, but identical outfits were dropped. In an effort to continue to encourage deacons quorum attendance and responsibility, the Presiding Bishopric introduced the Standard Quorum Award.⁵¹

The Standard Quorum Award was presented to groups of young men for completion of prescribed guidelines, including seventy-five percent quorum attendance for a month. The award successfully created “new interest” and “greater enthusiasm” for attending priesthood meetings and fulfilling assignments. Along with framed certificates, deacons quorums were often recognized with group

49. Bishops Meeting Minutes: 1851–1884, April 2, 1868, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

50. Joseph E. Taylor, “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper” in *Collected Discourses 1886–1898 Volume 5*, ed. Brian H. Stuy (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2011), 21.

51. Lee A. Palmer, “Aaronic Priesthood Quorum to Have Individual Standard Quorum Awards and New Type Frames,” *Improvement Era* 52, no. 10 (October 1949): 668.

photographs in the *Improvement Era*.⁵² The award essentially replaced uniforms as a primary means of retaining their attendance.

CONCLUSION

This episode involving deacons uniforms is a peculiar topic in Mormon history, since general authorities have rarely spoken about members' dress and appearance, except for encouraging modesty. Though members' might say their hearts were right in trying to reverence the sacrament by adding uniforms, leaders consistently counseled members to focus on the meaning rather than the procedural aspects of the ordinance.

The uniforms also reflected the time in which they had become popular. During a decade of depression—when Americans had to depend on one another, not only for economic, but also emotional survival—churches across the country often provided “a splendid opportunity to bring cheer and courage to those who [faced] a seemingly hopeless outlook on life.”⁵³ The uniforms and military order in the sacrament helped create a sense of community among the young men during hard times.

Finally, LDS leaders took into account the financial circumstances of deacons and their families, and made sure that parents were not forced to buy prescribed outfits at a time when they needed to be economically thrifty. Instead, leaders called on deacons only to be neat, clean, and “appear manly” for the sacrament.⁵⁴

52. See *ibid.* Photographs are featured in “Aaronic Priesthood” sections of the *Improvement Era*, starting in the 1940s.

53. Mary Jacobs, “Another Depression Era? Methodists recall church’s role in 1930 survival,” *The Reporter* (November 2008):1, <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=4419>. See also Jessie L. Embry, *Mormons Wards as Community* (New York: Global Publications, 2001), 132.

54. “Uniform Dress for Passing Sacrament Not Recommended,” *Progress of the Church* (January 1941): 2. See also “Proper Dress for Members Participating in Sacrament Services,” *Progress of the Church* (April 1940): 2.