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USAGE PATTERNS OF THOU, THEE, THY AND THINE  
AMONG LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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## USAGE PATTERNS OF THOU, THEE, THY AND THINE AMONG LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Don Norton

Until a couple of years ago, I had always assumed that the counsel in the Church to use the respect pronouns *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *thine* applied only to converts, children, and a few inattentive adults. On listening more closely, however, I find cause for general concern.

The illusion that we use these pronouns freely and correctly stems, I think, from the fact that two of these pronouns, *thee* and *thy*, are common usage: *thy* presents few problems; the object case *thee* occurs predictably in a few convenient syntactic formulas. Not many modern ears require *thine*, even before a word whose initial sound is a vowel.

By contrast, correct use of *thou* and its appropriate verb form is rare among the majority of Church members, except in a few scriptural formulas, such as "Our Father who/which art in heaven." Yet *thou* is difficult to avoid, since the structure that calls for it occurs normally in modern English. Thus it is common for a person to attempt the structure, then find himself in a syntactic corner. The consequence is widespread incorrect use of *thou* and the archaic verb form, even among educated, experienced church members. For example, a BYU religion faculty member whom I often hear pray, says, "We pray that thou will," rather than "wilt."

In the face of this difficulty, many people I talk to about the use of the respect pronouns wish that the Church would abandon the "quaint" usage, or at least make its use optional, as it is in impromptu ordinances and blessings: few Latter-day Saints master the usage; it poses special problems to converts; other churches have dropped the usage; and because it is in so little heard and used, it no longer signals the sacred deference it once did.

At the present time, however, Church leaders counsel to the contrary. Their desire is that the Saints continue to use in their public prayers the archaic pronouns of respect.

In an article in the current *New Era* (April, 1975), Sharon Jones, writing on the usage of *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *thine*, cites a policy statement in *The New Era* of September, 1972: "The Presiding Bishopric expresses concern about some incorrect uses of the language that seem to be gaining widespread momentum among the youth of the Church." After citing a mispronunciation of *patriarchal*, and the misuse of *thy* in church talks (. . . in the name of *thy* Son. . .), the note concludes: "It has also been noted that as they pray, many people are incorrectly using the terms *you* and *your* instead of *thee*, *thou*, and *thy*." (p. 7)

The most extensive discussion of this problem appeared in the Melchizedek Priesthood Manual of 1972-3, excerpts from President Joseph Fielding Smith's *Answers to Gospel Questions*.

(Selected from Vol. 2, pp. 14-15, Priesthood Manual, pp. 183-4)

- Q. Is it important that we use the words *thy*, *thine*, *thee*, and *thou* in addressing Deity; or is it proper when directing our thoughts in prayer to use the more common and modern words, *you* and *yours*?
- A. Our Eternal Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, should never be approached in prayer in the familiar expressions so commonly used in addressing human beings. The Father and the Son should always be honored in our prayers in the utmost humility and reverence. . . . The changing in the wording of the Bible to meet the popular language of our day, has, in the opinion of the writer and his brethren, been a great loss in the building of faith and spirituality in the minds and hearts of the people.

President Smith attempts in his answer to justify historically the usage of the respect pronouns. Although his conclusions are accurate (that the respect pronouns show sacred deference), his language facts are not true. He implies that disuse of the respect pronouns in prayer stemmed from increased worldly mindedness during the century following the translation of the Bible--a neglect to show deference to deity. In fact, there appears to be little historical relationship between common and sacred uses of these pronouns, until during more recent years, when churches in general have given up the archaic usage. Until then, *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *thine* seem always to have been the usage of English writ and worship, irrespective of their other uses. In daily usage, these pronouns at times reflected different degrees of deference and insult, finally disappearing altogether, except in isolated dialects.

What is the correct usage of *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *thine*? I found no handy reference that answered this question. One may exist, but I could not locate it in several hours of searching through language history texts and grammar/usage references. Finally, from several sources, I inferred the following rules, which are surprisingly simplex. I will start with the possessive pronoun, then take up the objective case *thee*, and finally explain *thou*, the most difficult form, since it requires a special affix on the verb.

*Thine* is the noun-substitute form, equivalent to *yours*, *theirs*, *mine*, etc. One needs it only very infrequently in prayers.

*Thy*, *thine* are possessive determiners, *thine* occurring before words whose initial sounds are vowels--*thine eyes*, *thine ear*, etc. *Thy* quite comfortably replaces *thine* in modern usage. (Biblical usage in some words is divided: *thy/thine hand*, *heart*. The *h* sometimes was silent, apparently.)

The usage of *Thee*, the object case pronoun, is quite straightforward.

*Thou*, as subject case pronoun, presents few problems (occasionally, a confused person will use substitute *thee*--"We pray that thee will. . ."); but the verb that follows it is unfamiliar usage, occurring only in prayers and in the scriptures. (Unfortunately, the custom of extensive oral reading of the scriptures is not common among us.)

Yet even the verb forms are highly regular, there being but a few, commonly occurring exceptions:

General rule: thou + verb base (present or past form) + -st or -est

thou	goest	wentest
"	seest	savest
"	showest	showedst

exceptions:

thou	art, wast, wert (subjunctive)
"	hast
"	wilt
"	shalt
"	must

*Do* takes two forms, the emphatic auxiliary *dost*, and the regular principal verb form, *doest* :

Thou dost sustain us.  
Thou doest many great works.

The past form presents a special problem, such as is evident in the verb *built/builded*:

*builtst, builtest, buildedst,  
buildest*

The solution is simple: Thou *didst* build.

One's ear is the best guide in the formation of the past forms.

How closely does LDS usage conform to these rules? As I have suggested, not very closely. My students of usage consistently confirm what I myself have observed: Very few Latter-day Saints use *thou* and the required verb forms confidently and in accord with the rules. These are the usage patterns we observe.

1. Correct usage is limited largely to the repetition of a very few scriptural or formulistic phrases. These are most common:

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .  
We ask thee. . .  
We pray thee to. . .  
We thank thee. . .  
We come before thee. . .

And other simple formulas.

Others occurring with some frequency are:

We pray that thou wilt. . .

Wilt thou. . .  
Thou hast. . .  
etc.

2. There exists a strong impulse in most Latter-day Saints to avoid risking the use of *thou*; and consequently most prayers omit that usage, substituting

- a. the imperative:  
(Please) bless us that. . .  
Grant us. . .  
Give us. . .
- b. or other indirect constructions:  
We're thankful for. . .  
We express thanks to thee for. . .

3. The uncertainty of the saints is evident not only in the avoidance of non-formulistic structures, but in the many errors one hears, and in the striking quality of prayers where the *thou is* used freely and correctly.

The errors are predictable, sometimes embarrassingly deviant:

We pray that thou will/would. . .  
We ask that thee will. . .  
We ask thou to. . .  
We thank thee for thy many blessings and  
we pray that you. . .  
We ask that ye will. . .  
We ask that ye/you might. . .  
We thank thee for the gospel that thou  
gaven us.  
. . .whatever thy seest we stand in need of.

The causes of the disuse of the hallowed forms are easy to identify. First of all, the respect pronouns occur only in prayers and in the scriptures, which constitute only a fraction of our linguistic experience. And fluent spoken usage is the product of ear training. Because usage of *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *thine* is so occasional, we should not expect fluency without special vocal rehearsal as compensation for sparse ear training.

I think the ultimate problem, however, is the loss of the sense of the sacred, such a marked characteristic of life style in the modern secular world. People to whom the sacred is the greater reality find it natural to use special linguistic signals to mark the importance of their communication with that transcendent reality.

This point is the essence of President Smith's argument to continue the usage of the respect pronouns:

As mankind gets farther and farther away from the worship of the True and Living God, the less respect and reverence man will give to God. Therefore, this reverence being weakened or missing, the less inclined are men to look upon the Supreme Being with awe, humility, and reverence. (p. 184)

The solution to teaching the saints to use the hallowed pronoun forms is first to teach them reverence for sacred; then to provide intensive, systematic programs which call for the frequent use of these pronouns

as they would be used in prayers--scripture reading in the family; a charge to parents to learn the usage themselves, and then to guide their children in proper usage; and finally, outlines and exercises which will serve to establish more securely the usage which the authorities in the Church exhort us to observe.

Without a deliberate program toward this end, I predict that fluent and correct usage will not become general.

The objection to the respect pronouns my students usually offer is that it is sincerity that counts, not strict adherence to grammatical rules. My reply is that the right kind of sincerity will quickly prompt a Latter-day Saint to learn and use the language which traditionally has been used to mark that deference to the Lord which true sincerity implies. I am confident that the Lord does not reject sincere prayers that are ungrammatical; but I also know that once a true saint receives counsel on a point such as this one, he will desire to follow that counsel, whatever the cost in effort. I believe that the respect pronouns, when used properly, genuinely facilitate worship; for that is the function they have served for centuries. One of my students, on hearing an elderly church member offer a fluent prayer in which *thou* occurred frequently and correctly, stated succinctly the crucial point: "His prayer was vivid and beautiful, very impressive."