

Penalty (Mormonism)

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Woman in [temple clothing](#) circa the 1870s, depicted with a knife symbolically referenced in the penalty to allow ones body to "be cut asunder and all your bowels gush out."^{[1]:23[2]:141[3]:26}

In [Mormonism](#), a **penalty** is a specified punishment for breaking an [oath](#) of secrecy after receiving the [Nauvoo endowment ceremony](#). Adherents promised they would submit to execution in specific ways should they reveal certain contents of the ceremony. In the ceremony participants each symbolically enacted three of the methods of their execution: throat slitting, heart removal, and disembowelment. These penalties were first instituted by [Joseph Smith](#) in 1842, and further developed by [Brigham Young](#) after [Smith's death](#). The penalties were similar to oaths made as part of a particular rite of [Freemasonry](#) practiced in western New York at the time the endowment was developed. During the 20th century, the largest Mormon denomination, [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) (LDS Church), gradually softened the graphic nature of their penalties, and in 1990, removed them altogether from its version of the ceremony. Other Mormon denominations continue to have the penalties as part of their temple oaths.

Original oaths^[edit]

On May 4, 1842, [Joseph Smith](#) instituted the endowment ritual in his [Red Brick Store](#) in [Nauvoo, Illinois](#) to some of his closest circle of adherents later termed the [Anointed Quorum](#).^{[4][5]} At three different stages of the endowment, participants were asked to take an oath of secrecy regarding the ceremony.^{[6]:8}

Oaths^[edit]

- Throat:** The participants first promised, "Should I [reveal any of the secrets], I agree that my throat be cut from ear to ear, and my tongue torn out by its roots"^{[7][8][9]}
- Heart:** "our breasts ... be torn open, our hearts and vitals torn out and given to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field;"^{[1]:22[10]}
- Bowels:** "our body ... be cut asunder and all your bowels gush out."^{[1]:23[2]:141[3]:26}

Enactment^[edit]

Each of the described penalties was accompanied by gestures known as the "**execution of the penalty**" which had the oath taker simulate the actions described in the oath.^{[6]:8}

1. **Throat:** The participant placed his or her right hand palm-down with the thumb extended and the tip of the thumb just under the left ear. The gesture was made by drawing the tip of the thumb swiftly across the throat until the thumb was just under the right ear then dropping the hand and arm quickly to the side of the participant's body.
2. **Heart:** The participant placed his or her hand in a cup form over the left breast. The gesture was made by pulling the hand swiftly across the breast then quickly dropping the hand and arm to the side of the participant's body.
3. **Bowels:** The participant placed his or her right hand palm-down with the thumb extended and the tip of the thumb on the left of the torso just above the left hip. The gesture was made by drawing the thumb swiftly across the stomach until the thumb was just above the right hip and the hand and arm were quickly dropped to the side of the participant's body.

Similar Masonic oaths^[edit]

The oaths and their accompanying gestures resembled certain oaths performed in a particular Freemasonry tradition in western New York at the time,^{[2]:141} in which participants promised:

1. **Oath of an "Entered Apprentice Mason" (Throat):** "I will ... never reveal any part or parts, art or arts, point or points of the secret arts and mysteries of ancient Freemasonry. . . binding myself under no less penalty than to have my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by the roots"^{[11]:21–22} "This is given by drawing your right hand across your throat, the thumb next to your throat."^{[11]:23}
2. **Oath of a "Fellow Craft Mason" (Heart):** "I ... most solemnly and sincerely promise and swear, that I will not give the degree of a Fellow Craft Mason to anyone of an inferior degree nor to any other being in the known world ... binding myself under no less penalty than to have my left breast torn open and my heart and vitals taken from thence ... to become a prey to the wild beasts of the field and vulture of the air"^{[11]:52} "The sign is given by drawing your right hand-flat with the palm of it next to your breast across your breast from the left to the right side with some quickness and dropping it down by your side."^{[11]:53}
3. **Oath of a "Master Mason" (Bowels):** "I ... most solemnly and sincerely promise and swear in addition to my former obligations that I will not give the degree of a Master Mason to any of an inferior degree nor to any other being in the known world ... binding myself under no less penalty than to have my body severed in two in the midst and divided to the north and south, my bowels burnt to ashes"^{[11]:73–75} "The Penal Sign is given by putting the right hand to the left side of the bowels, the hand open with the thumb next to the belly and drawing it across the belly and letting it fall; this is done tolerably quick. This alludes to the penalty of the obligation: 'Having my body severed in twain,' etc."^{[11]:77}

Changes^[edit]

Beginning in 1919, [LDS Church president Heber J. Grant](#) appointed a committee charged with revising the endowment ceremony which was done under the direction of [apostle George F. Richards](#) from 1921 to 1927. Among the changes instituted was a modification of the oaths. While the gestures remained unchanged, the church clarified the verbal description of the oath with the phrase, "rather than do so, I would suffer my life to be taken."^[citation needed]

Elimination^[edit]

In April 1990, the LDS Church eliminated the oaths and the gestures from the endowment.^{[9][12]} During the period when these oaths were used, there was no documented instance in which a person was killed by the LDS Church or committed [suicide](#) for having violated the oaths of secrecy of the endowment.^[citation needed]

Confusion with other doctrines^[edit]

These penalty oaths and the [oath of vengeance](#) are often confused. The oath of vengeance—a promise to pray for justice for [the murders](#) of Joseph Smith and his brother [Hyrum](#)—was removed from the endowment in 1927 as part of the church's "[Good Neighbor](#)" [policy](#),^[citation needed] and the penalty oaths were removed in 1990. The penalty oaths are also frequently confused with the concept of [blood atonement](#).^[by whom?]

Continuation by Mormon fundamentalists^[edit]

Some groups within the [Mormon fundamentalist](#) movement continue to practice the endowment without modification.^[citation needed] These groups still participate in these oaths when performing the endowment.^[citation needed] Some of the denominations that continue to perform the original endowment include the [Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints](#), the [Apostolic United Brethren](#), and the [True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of Saints of the Last Days](#).^[citation needed]

See also^[edit]

- [Mormonism and violence](#)
- [Criticism of Mormonism](#)