

# The Legacy of Lowell L. Bennion

*By Eugene England*

This essay discusses the lasting impact of Lowell L. Bennion, founder and former director of the University of Utah Institute of Religion, who later became dean of students and professor of sociology at the university. It concentrates primarily on Bennion's teachings and writing about faith, education, Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and Christ's Atonement. Bennion died 21 February 1996.

Originally published: *Sunstone* 19, no. 3 (September 1996): 27–44.

LOWELL BENNION ONCE changed my life with a question. In one of his classes at the Salt Lake Institute of Religion at the University of Utah in the winter of 1953, we were discussing God's equal love for all, his being "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34), when one student asked why, then, a difference between persons existed in the Church for Negroes, who couldn't receive the priesthood or enjoy temple blessings. I quickly raised my hand and said, "We've also been talking about God's justice, and since Negroes were neutral in the War in Heaven, they are simply being punished for that now." Brother B. didn't fulminate or bear down on me—as I have sometimes done to such students since. He mildly asked, "How do you know Negroes were not valiant in the pre-existence?"

Of course, I had no good answer—it was simply an unquestioned tradition in my home and my Sunday School classes. I listened carefully as Brother Bennion gently suggested that the God he knew would surely let his children know if they had done something wrong, so they could repent. And since he hadn't revealed anything about Negroes in the pre-mortal life, perhaps it was best to believe that, as the Book of Mormon claims, all are indeed alike unto God, black and white (2 Ne. 26:33). As I listened and considered this idea, my whole way of thinking about the gospel began to change. I realized with shame that many of my beliefs, central ones that affected my way of seeing the world and treating other people, were based on very flimsy and unexamined foundations and were inconsistent with some great central principles that I claimed to believe—such as that "God is no respecter of persons."

That crucial and permanent change was not imposed on me by a new outside authority. I hadn't substituted Brother Bennion in place of tradition or the speculations of some Church teachers. It was educed, led out of me from inside, in the central act of education that was Lowell Bennion's great gift and the heart of his legacy. In both his teaching and his writing, he could merely suggest, by a question or phrase or story or new juxtaposition, new possibilities for thinking about the gospel and our relation to it—possibilities that resonated with sound logic and simple

goodness in ways that spoke to what Lincoln called the “better angels” of our nature as children of divine beings.

Brother B. once wrote, “A Christian believes in plain and simple living and high thinking.”<sup>1</sup> He certainly lived plain and simple, with his cow and garden and home-made bread and famous battered Ford truck, used mainly to haul manure for his garden or to take donated goods to needy widows. At his funeral last March, President Gordon B. Hinckley, his neighbor for fifty years, mused that Lowell had never had a car as nice as any in the parking lot that morning.

Besides plain living, Lowell Bennion clearly believed in—and for nearly seventy years consistently practiced—high thinking. From his missionary diary to the last collection of his essays and his last book, both of which are being published by Aspen Books this year, he has produced a greater volume of writing, concerning a greater variety of subjects related to Mormon thought and religious practice, in a greater variety of publications, than any other writer. Throughout that huge quantity (over thirty books and manuals and over 200 articles and essays) he has maintained a consistent high quality, a unique voice, and—despite the variety of subjects—kept his focus on a few central ideas.

One of those ideas is contained in a favorite scripture, the *first* great commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy *mind*” (Matt. 22:37). Lowell Bennion’s life exemplified the second part of that scripture, the second great commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (vs. 39) and the subtitle of Mary Bradford’s fine biography, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Dialogue Foundation, 1995) captures that part of his legacy. We who have known him personally will long continue to be influenced most by those legacies of teacher, counselor, humanitarian, by his remarkable, life-enhancing and life-changing influence during three careers: director and teacher at the Salt Lake Institute from 1934 to 1962, then ten years as a dean of students and professor of sociology at the University of Utah, and finally his remarkable leadership of Salt Lake’s Community Services Council until he was past eighty. But many thousands of others have been, and, I believe, thousands will be far into the future, *most* influenced by his thinking and writing, and that is the legacy I focus on here.

#### THOUGHTFUL TEACHING, COUNSELING, SERVING

LOWELL BENNION’S THOUGHT is unique and important partly because it cannot be separated from those other great legacies. His books and articles, especially until the 1970s, when he left academia, were either written at first as manuals or lessons designed for Church teaching and counseling or grew directly out of classroom experience and students’ problems and questions. He believed that *teaching* should be focused in great, central principles and ideas, one at a time; that *counseling* should connect directly to a person’s fundamental needs, which derived from their eternal nature as divine beings, children of God with very specific needs related to that nature; and that *service* should be skillful and intelligent, based on

recognition of those same needs—for instance, that people need to be creative and productive as well as well-fed and warm.

Brother Bennion’s writings will always derive their particular power less from their literary beauty than from the moral authority of his life and the presence of his life in those writings, and he sometimes seemed to belittle theory over practice—when he left the U. he said, “I used to teach religion; now I practice it.” But he knew well the value of ideas and the power of words to move and motivate. In “Teaching Religion by Word of Mouth,” a 1939 essay printed in the *Millennial Star*, he reviewed the great value of learning religion through personal experience and through the example of others. But then he explored an equally valuable third way, through the spoken and written word: “The skillful writer with eyes to see and ears to hear and the talent to express his keener insight and deeper understanding . . . holds our attention to that expression until we feel it more intensely than life itself.”<sup>2</sup> He saw Jesus as “the Master Teacher” chiefly because he was an “artist in parable.” Brother B. was such an artist, constructing parables from his own and others’ experience, creating thought-experiments and logical connections, and using the scriptures with great power. A primary example of the spiritual and literary quality of his writing is a very short essay published in *Sunstone* in 1978 called “The Weightier Matters” (reprinted in this issue). Read it and see how, in just over 700 words, this great practical thinker and writer can use both others’ and his own experience, connected to scriptural example and teaching, to create a masterpiece focused in one great idea that moves us to action. The idea in this essay is that we Mormons, who properly focus on paying tithing and offerings, performing ordinances, and carrying on the spiritual and social functions of the Church, also should and can attend to what Christ called the “weightier matters” (Matt. 23:23), can perform just and merciful and loving service, both in the Church and in our communities.

#### AN EFFECTIVE TRANSLATOR

LOWELL BENNION IS Mormonism’s greatest *practical* philosopher. Reading over his work, I am struck that he doesn’t quite fit on a list that might run from Orson Pratt to B. H. Roberts to Sterling McMurrin to Truman Madsen to James Faulconer, a list of more theoretical philosophers. He often quoted Goethe’s maxim, “What from your father’s heritage is lent, earn it anew to really possess it.” He stands apart as one who did just that: he took the great central principles of the restored gospel and the functions of the restored Church, rethought them, and discovered anew and expressed elegantly their implicit intellectual structure and potential consistency—and then he showed in original ways how they can provide motivation and guidance in living, from courtship and marriage to working out a personal philosophy of life to caring for the sick and elderly. His constant theme (harking back to his study of the Hebrew prophets in graduate school under the influence of Max Weber but reconfirmed by what he then found in the New Testament and the teachings of Book of Mormon and modern prophets) is that true religion is rooted in chaste, meek personal living, in faith in a personal God, and in courageous social

morality based on the conviction that God loves all his children equally and expects those who claim to love him to love those children as well.

Brother B.'s signature scripture is from one of his beloved literary prophets: "What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8). His own particular integrity, which cost him much, was that for well over sixty years, with a clarity and consistency rare and satisfying as water in a dry land, he spoke and wrote in favor of positive, integrated religion, based in affirmative and universal principles. He spoke out fearlessly against unchastity, drugs, idleness, intellectual pride, materialism, racism, and sexism—against prejudice of all kinds. At a time when our unparalleled growth in numbers and wealth and power has tempted us Mormons to forget "the least of these," Lowell Bennion did not forget. And at a time when many of us have spoken out against the failings of our brothers and sisters in the Church with judgment and harshness and even self-congratulation, he remained conciliatory and non-confrontative, never disparaging those he disagreed with nor striking back at those who judged or attacked or even injured him.

While I was rereading Lowell's work, just after his death, I heard Chieko Okazaki give a speech that made me think of a quality of his writing that we might all well imitate. Sister Okazaki told of a recent tour, in her capacity as first counselor in the general presidency of the Relief Society, where she visited Korea, Tonga, and Mexico. She remembered that she had been blessed by President Hinckley, when she had been set apart six years ago, that (perhaps partly because she is of Japanese ancestry, raised in Hawaii) she would bring a unique quality to the presidency, would represent, to those outside the United State and Canada, their oneness with the Church, and that "you will be free in speaking, that your tongue may be loosed as you speak to the people." When she reread that blessing as she prepared for her upcoming tour, she felt "filled with a great desire to speak to [each native people] in their own language." She was especially anxious about Korean because "I knew that Korea and Japan have not always had good relations, and I wanted to show my concern and love for my Korean brothers and sisters" by speaking "to them directly from my heart without an interpreter." She wondered if she would be able to read Korean, because the pronunciation is very difficult and quite different from Japanese. She had her talk translated into Korean and had a Korean sister record the talk so she could play it over and over to hear the pronunciation. She prayed and practiced and practiced and prayed, but she couldn't get it right and was ready to give up and use an interpreter. Early one morning, as she lay in bed sorrowing over her failure and praying, begging for help, a voice came to her mind that said, "Write out the talk in *hiragana*," which is the Japanese set of writing symbols for all the various sounds. Though at first that made no sense, she took the Korean version of the talk and painstakingly wrote it out syllable by syllable in *hiragana*—and gradually she came to understand the grammatical structure of Korean and thus its intonation and pronunciation. When she arrived in Korea and got up to speak without an interpreter, the people were at first puzzled, then assumed she had memorized her greeting and would soon be joined by an interpreter. When she kept going they began to stare, their mouths dropped open, and then tears came to their eyes. Sister Okazaki writes,

They listened with their whole hearts. . . . I felt a spirt rise within me, a spirit of love, of energy, of connectedness. I could feel the words coming . . . and I could see, on the faces of the people before me, the meaning of the words. They came to me afterwards, some of them weeping and unable to speak. Elderly women pressed my hands and groped for words and then began to speak to me in Japanese [a long unused, perhaps previously hated, language for them]. Many of them said, “Thank you. . . . You are like us!”<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Brother Bennion often prayed and practiced, practiced and prayed, until he could translate his ideas, many of which were based ultimately in very esoteric and complex thought and sometimes unpopular positions, into clear, concrete sentences, with specific, practical illustrations and moving images and summaries—and, perhaps above all, the right intonation—so he could communicate with all of us. A tendency of most of us, certainly I have it, is to put our energy into researching the facts and arguing our unusual conclusions and connections—rather than in that final, crucial effort Lowell Bennion and Chieko Okazaki have given themselves to, *translating* our work, finding the right *tone*, so that all our readers, or at least most of them, can understand, can feel our love and concern. Thus they can hear what we say and be genuinely affected by it (rather than merely offended or made defensive), because they know that our “faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death” (D&C 121:44) and can say in their hearts, “You are one of us!”

Just after I heard Sister Okazaki speak, I reread Brother Bennion’s great classic, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth* (Deseret Book, 1959), and I immediately saw there an example of effective translation. That book, his best and most important single work, is the only LDS book devoted to epistemology, to what is, perhaps, the most basic and important question for mortals: *How* do we know anything? How do we find the truth, know what to trust, decide whom to obey? Certainly the answers to every other question of life depend on how we answer that one. Brother B. characteristically gives the book a practical focus by first reviewing the particular challenges a university student faces when he comes, usually with a rather simple, inherited faith, to a place devoted to skepticism, to questioning present beliefs and offering new kinds of authority and many competing claims. Then Brother Bennion defines truth, using the excellent scriptural as well as general sources, and he rejoices over the search for it. He introduces the four ways truth has traditionally been sought—outside authority, reason, personal experience, and some form of inner assurance or revelation—and thoroughly surveys the strengths and weaknesses of each. He then discusses the great fields of knowledge, science, philosophy, art, everyday life, and religion, and he lists the particular contributions and limitations of each. In an appendix, he discusses the scriptures as a source of truth, their unique strengths and their dangerous limitations if misread or pitted against other forms of knowledge as a sole authority, and he gives some guides for best appreciating and gaining truth from them.

## REVELATION AFFECTED BY WORLD VIEW

IN THE APPENDIX to *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, Lowell Bennion lays out two of his most unusual and important ideas, which anticipate by at least twenty years the ideas of postmodern Mormon philosophers about scriptural language. First, that the Doctrine and Covenants definition of “truth,” usually misquoted and misunderstood as “things as they are, were, and will be” (see D&C 93:24), actually says truth is “*knowledge of*” such things. It thus suggests that truth is always a function of its knowers, a product in part of each knower’s point of view, not an absolute that anyone can encompass and judge perfectly from the outside—which is a position central to the thought of all contemporary philosophers and literary critics.

The related second idea is that we live in an ongoing, continually developing universe in which God is a genuine and nonabsolute participant. In fact, God is himself in important ways a creature of language and its limitations. The Doctrine and Covenants informs us that God definitely speaks to us through his prophets but does so “in their weakness, after the manner of their language” (D&C 1:24), which seems consistent with contemporary ideas about how language functions relative to the world view and rhetorical resources of the speaker and the “discourse community.” Both of these scriptures seem to suggest that there is no way for knowers, to get completely independent of nature and language for an absolute and therefore universally compelling “meaning.” The consequences of this view are enormous and very challenging, but Brother Bennion created a wonderful, carefully intoned, translation that was approved by the board of Deseret Book, including general authorities, and was read with great profit by a whole generation of Mormons of great diversity. Here is a sample:

Revelation not only reflects God, but also man. God is concerned with both the prophet and the people to whom he is speaking. Therefore, the scriptures should be read not only with God in mind, but also the persons who wrote them and the people to whom they were directly addressed. . . .

Much of the harshness and cruelty in Joshua and Judges, and some of the deception practiced in certain episodes related in other Old Testament books are inconsistent, in our judgment, with the spirit and teachings of the Master. . . . When we find teachings or interpretations of history therein which are wholly inconsistent with the character and purposes of God as revealed to Jesus Christ or to the prophets, then we should look for an explanation in men—either in the writers, copyists, translators, the people for whom they were intended, or in our own lack of understanding as readers. With Moroni we should, “. . . take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God. . . .” (Moroni. 7:14.)

Brother Bennion ends this long caution about misreading the scriptures with a quotation from Brigham Young:

“[I]t is impossible for the poor, weak, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its per-

fection. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.”<sup>4</sup>

When I read this again, with Sister Okazaki’s example of earnest, prayerful translation in mind, I was chagrined, even ashamed. I looked again at a passage in my new book, *Making Peace*, on an ethics of diversity, where I argue, based on Brother Bennion’s great insight, that the passages in the Book of Mormon that seem clearly racist are not evidence, as some read them, that *God* is a racist, but rather reflect the world view of those who wrote and received them. But I did not pray and practice, practice and pray, until I got the tone right, and I’m afraid my essay did little to make peace with those whom I wanted to reach—it may even have simply offended them because they saw in my words merely an accusation that the Book of Mormon prophets were racists.

### RICHLY PLAIN AND SIMPLE

LOWELL BENNION EARLY developed and always maintained that remarkable ability to translate very sophisticated and sometimes quite radical thinking into the proper language and tone needed to communicate to his audience. His versatility is one evidence: he wrote manuals for nearly every age and variety in the Church, from Junior Sunday School and ten-year-old Blazers and Bluebirds through all ages of the old Mutual Improvement Association, both young women and young men, as well as institute and Church education classes, and on to Relief Society, priesthood, investigators’, and gospel doctrine classes. His Sunday School manual *An Introduction to the Gospel* was used for both gospel essentials and gospel doctrine classes throughout the Church from 1955 to 1970. He learned to speak with equal ease and effectiveness, about serious religious and intellectual matters as well as common feelings and aspirations, with young boys and local cowhands at his ranch in Idaho, with the brightest graduate students and faculty at the University of Utah, with members of the Salt Lake Ministers Association, with friends in study groups, with ward members he served as a bishop, and with the widows and elderly he constantly served. It isn’t that he *varied* his language for his different audiences. Rather he developed, with prayer and practice, a language and tone that was clear and simple and yet rich enough that he could use it with equal ease and effectiveness in a worship service, a graduate seminar, a Sunstone symposium, or general conference.

The style is deceptively plain and straightforward, rising only occasionally, almost shyly, to eloquence or passion, rarely personal, using instead other’s experience (or his own but somewhat camouflaged or at least slightly abstracted) to create something more like parables than concrete examples. His work will often move progressively from what seems rather obvious common ground, through definitions and scriptural support, to new concepts tentatively examined—to finally be captured in something like an epigram. Here he is in *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, writing on the nature and value of faith:

Faith is adventurous and creative. It not only is the sphere of the possible, but is also the power which often makes the possible come into

being. Faith is that remarkable quality of the human spirit which first envisages the possibilities of life, then lives as though these possibilities were realities, and by this action often makes them real. In the realm of knowledge, one conforms to what is; in the realm of faith one creates life after the image carried in his heart.<sup>5</sup>

And here he is, a few pages later, on the *limits* of faith:

One can also place his trust and faith in that which is not true. This experience turns out to be blind faith—not the kind that is based on knowledge and experience or quickened by the Spirit of Deity. And yet it is commonly called faith and has feelings in common with it. . . . A couple marries with little understanding of each others personalities and with even less knowledge of the nature of marriage. But their minds and hearts are full of hope, adventure, confidence—attitudes which accompany the feeling of faith. Their blind faith often leads them not to bliss, but to the divorce court.<sup>6</sup>

Brother Bennion has the consistent power he admires in Jesus, the Master Teacher—to give a large idea a recognizable, almost homely, concrete form, and then move from that in a kind of crescendo to a restrained but unmistakable celebration of the idea:

The search for knowledge is a great adventure consistent with man's need as a child of the great Creator to be creative. The quest for knowledge, the activity of learning, is as satisfying to the mind as is the final discovery; plowing and planting the field are as meaningful as reaping the harvest; writing a book is often more rewarding than the reading of it. Growing things live and bear fruit. Reality is of such magnitude that it will take an eternity of progression to formulate propositions relating to it which are comprehensive and true.<sup>7</sup>

That was written when Brother Bennion was fifty years old; now consider his tone just after he turned eighty, in his last book that was published while he was alive, *The Legacies of Jesus*. Lowell is writing here of meekness, with his own humility but with a characteristic edge of implied criticism as well:

[T]he meek are those who are teachable and open-minded, those who will learn from their fellow human beings as well as from God—not because it is the intellectually correct thing to do, but because they are not concerned with themselves and can truly listen and, therefore, learn. I have perhaps a rather unorthodox view of the humble as those who feel no need to continually take their personal pulse, analyze how they feel about a given topic, or develop and express an opinion on every item of conversation.<sup>8</sup>

As one who seems to feel a need to rise to every controversy, I feel the bite of that; do you?

## BLACKS AND THE PRIESTHOOD

**O**F COURSE, FOR all the mildness of his writing and manner, Lowell could and did occasionally rise to controversy, and his humble desire and loving



effort to translate his words to be understood did not, of course, protect him completely from misunderstanding and trouble. He spoke out in 1976 for consideration by Mormon law makers of the Equal Rights Amendment on its own merits and against capital punishment in 1992, when those were extremely unpopular positions, even deemed apostate by some of his fellow Mormons in Utah. He never spoke out publicly or wrote on the subject of blacks and the priesthood nor *initiated* a discussion on the subject, but when he was pressed, he spoke with clarity and passion about the inconsistency between our basic gospel ideals and scriptures and a policy of discrimination, arguing particularly against the unofficial idea that blacks were being punished for their ancestry or some unknown failing before mortality. And he stated clearly, almost fiercely, his conviction that we should think and try to act in accord with our principles.

In an essay he wrote in the early 1970s, a time of great pain for any devout and compassionate Mormon like him as the pressure concerning denial of priesthood to blacks rose to a climax. Brother Bennion discharged his feelings and conscience on the issue. But he kept his essay in his desk and did not publish it until 1988 when he let me include it in my collection of his works. Here is a sample:

Since student days contacts with individuals of minority groups continue to instruct and inspire me. A Negro lady of fifty came to a Mormon Doctrine class at the Institute of Religion years ago. Learning that she was a daughter of a Protestant minister and devout in her own faith, I asked her why she had come to us. Her answer I shall never forget:

“In the summer I am a recreation worker on a playground in Ogden. White as well as black children come to me with questions and problems. Many are Latter-day Saints. I have come here to learn your teachings so my answers will be right and not hurt their faith in any way.”

One reason I did not recognize my racial prejudice in the days of my youth, I believe, was because my view of the Gospel must have been fragmented if not pulverized, I must not have seen it in one piece, in a framework of fundamental concepts, as I am beginning to now. Nor was I particularly interested in the implications of the Gospel for the social issues of the day. High walls separated religion from daily life in some areas. . . .

Prejudice is not easy to overcome. Even after one has restructured his thinking to cast it out, feelings and attitudes of bygone years may remain. Perhaps our only hope to be able to conquer negative feelings is by finding ways to express positive feelings of good will toward our brethren of all races and culture.

I ask God and my brothers of another color to forgive me the folly of my youth, my pride, and my in-sensitivity in the past to their feelings and their innermost needs. And I promise to never again prejudge a man because of the color of his skin and I would hope for no other reason either.<sup>9</sup>

## “LOVE . . . AND INSIGHT”

ONE OF THE most dramatic moments in Mormon intellectual history reveals both the radical courage and compassion that drove Lowell Bennion’s thought and also the remarkable tact and humility of his effort to translate that thought into the face-to-face encounter with others who might disagree with him. Mary Bradford describes it in detail in her biography. In the summer of 1954, at the Church Education System convention for all seminary, institute, and BYU religion teachers and administrators, two sessions were held that consisted, as reported in the *Church News*, of “graduate courses in religion [mainly conducted by] General Authorities.” A three-week session in July on “Advanced Theology,” under the direction of Elder Harold B. Lee, with lectures by the executive committee of the Church Board of Education, all apostles, was followed in August by a session on “Problems in Teaching Religion.” On 25 August 1954, Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith spoke on his new book, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*, repeating much that he had taught earlier in the summer, including that the earth was 6000 years old and that there had been no death before Adam’s fall. He concluded by insisting that if the teachers did not take him literally, they had no place in the system, and Lowell rose to respond during the question period. Consider carefully his tone, the way he translated his deep concerns so Elder Smith could hear him: “I’m interested not only in the questions discussed here, but in how to put them across to our students so that they may keep faith in the gospel. . . . I’d like to take just a minute or two to confess my faith in my method to see if it’s sound in your opinion.”

He talked of the welfare of his students, his desire to help them mature in their faith, both in the gospel and in reasoned inquiry. He told how as a young teacher he had tended “to pit religion against science and defend religion,” but he had learned that “wasn’t very successful in terms of building faith and converting people.” For one thing, he realized he didn’t know enough about science to be authoritative, so he learned another method, which he went on to demonstrate right there to Elder Smith. He bore his testimony of God, Christ, and the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith, then he told how he had learned to concentrate on those convictions with his students, to defend the gospel when science seemed to directly contradict it—such as in some interpretations of evolution that claimed there is no God behind the creative process. “But,” he went on,

when it comes to details like the exact process of how God created Adam on this earth and brought forth things on the earth, I say in the name of religion we don’t know, and also that science has not come far enough along to be convinced either. . . . I try not to get the student agitated against science, get him prejudiced against geology. . . . I do everything in my power to help them believe in the gospel and respect the scientific method, but be critical of its findings.<sup>10</sup>

He pointed out that some prominent Mormon scientists disagreed with Elder Smith, but, as Mary Bradford notes in her account, he tactfully refrained from mentioning that some general authorities, including President McKay, disagreed,

too. Then he asked, “President Smith, am I justified in teaching as fundamentals . . . the laws of faith in Christ and the church . . . and teaching my students to keep an open mind in those things that are not wholly unified or absolutely sure, [in order] to hold those young people (who may believe in the geological age of the earth) to the church?”

Right after the conference, T. Edgar Lyon, Lowell’s colleague at the institute, wrote him a letter, saying he wanted to put in writing what he knew Lowell would shrug off or make a joke of if he told him in person. He regretted that the conference had hardly mentioned students:

Your words fell like manna from heaven on a starving people. . . . A Y man sitting back of me . . . said to me in a low voice as you finished, “What a thrill it must be to work with a man of love, vision, wisdom, and insight, as well as great faith. You are to be envied.”<sup>11</sup>

Yes, T. Edgar was to be envied, and all of us are who knew Lowell Bennion, who were blessed by his unique presence, his example, his voice that combined love, insight, and faith in an unparalleled way. The voice survives best in his writings, and I beg you to read and reread them, in order to recover and preserve that sweet quality of concern for the student, for helping young people, children of God, realize their full potential, without fear, without being forced into false dichotomies between the evidence that comes from heaven and that which comes from the earth, without having to choose between obedience and integrity, between faith and reason, between loving God with their hearts and with their minds.

#### A LOST OPPORTUNITY

**A**S I HAVE thought about Lowell and read again his writings, I have mainly rejoiced in a life uniquely well lived and the unique written legacy he has left. Truly Sterling McMurrin could say, “He was the only person I have known who could die with a clear conscience.” Lowell himself, quoting from Brigham Young’s funeral directions, *could* have said, though in modesty he never would, “let my earthly house or tabernacle rest in peace and have a good sleep until the morning of the first resurrection; no crying or mourning with anyone as I have done my work faithfully and in good faith.”<sup>12</sup>

But I *have* mourned, nevertheless. For me, one of the greatest tragedies of modern Mormonism is that Lowell Bennion, the person and the voice I believe was most blessed by the Lord to be a peacemaker in our time and an intellectual and ethical model for our maturing world religion, didn’t really succeed. For all his enormous intellectual and spiritual gifts and saint-like humility and temperance, his willingness to pray and practice, practice and pray until he could effectively translate his ideas so that *anyone* should have been able to say, “You are one of us”—for all that. Lowell was attacked and ultimately betrayed by a few people who would not let him be one of them. At the height of his abilities, just when there was an unparalleled opportunity to use his powerful intellectual creations and moral example to establish Church education on the firm foundation of an integrated theology that put people and their God-like needs first, that affirmed social morality as central to

true religion—just then, in 1962, he was essentially fired from his position as director of the Salt Lake Institute and became a dean and then professor of sociology at the University of Utah. At the time, he was the Church’s most prolific as well as effective writer, with periods when his manuals were being used simultaneously by two or three different classes in Sunday School and MIA, both in English and other languages, his study courses (on everything from courtship and marriage to the Book of Mormon) were being used in many institute and BYU religious education classes, and he had an article appearing in every single issue of *both* the Church official magazines, the *Improvement Era* and the *Instructor*. He had been asked to give devotionals at BYU, the baccalaureate address at the University of Utah’s 1956 commencement, and, in 1958, to speak in the priesthood session of General Conference on achieving happiness in marriage. His influence was widening beyond Church education as he gave a keynote address at a “Religion in Life Week” at the University of Colorado in 1962, addressed an “Inter-faith Dialogue” of religious leaders on Mormonism in 1963 and 1964, and after years of being courted for both administrative and faculty positions at the U., he took them and became increasingly successful and respected for his work there.

But after 1962 his output of manuals and articles for Church magazines and opportunities to speak in Church forums gradually diminished. He remained on the Church Correlation Committee for Youth and was asked again by President McKay to address the general priesthood session of Conference in 1968, but his influence on Church education was essentially lost by the 1970s.

#### ORTHODOX, RATIONAL RELIGION

**A**S I LOOK around, there is much to mourn. That speech Lowell Bennion gave at General Conference in 1968, which reviewed the history of the LDS commitment to education and encouraged Mormon youth to continue that tradition—that wonderfully affirmative speech nearly thirty years ago—was the *last* speech given to a general Church audience that unapologetically and unqualifiedly praised the life of the mind. Every speech since that I know about that has discussed learning, even at our Church university, BYU, has focused entirely or at least mostly on the *dangers* of intellectual activity and the pitfalls of education. Listen to Brother B.’s voice in that conference address, and consider what we have lost:

You and I were not only created in the physical image of our Father in heaven; we were also created in his spiritual image. And if the glory of God is intelligence, then the glory of man is also intelligence. If God is Creator, man must be creative to satisfy his soul. If God is love, man must be loving. If God is a person of integrity, then we must also be honest, to be true to our own nature, which we have inherited in part from him. . . . [It] is not enough to believe the gospel; it must also be understood. . . . The gospel has a beautiful structure about it. It has form. It is something like a beautiful Greek edifice, if you will. The Ten Commandments . . . hang together beautifully. They strengthen each other. The Beatitudes form . . . a map of life,

each one building on the preceding one. The wonderful attributes of God reinforce one another and give us a marvelous basis for a relationship with him. It seems to me we need to reflect deeply upon the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms of its great fundamentals, and then we need to relate these fundamentals to the issues of the day.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1962, it seems to me, that sane, comprehensive, orthodox religion of Lowell Bennion, based in the great fundamentals and connected to the great life issues, has been gradually replaced, in much Church education, preaching, and publishing. Even in the “unsponsored sector” there is a piecemeal, anti-rational emphasis on searching out official doctrines (or merely esoteric ones), with no sustained effort to integrate or evaluate those doctrines in terms of fundamentals or to relate them to the issues of the day, but only to confirm them by authority or mere feeling. As Lowell Bennion gradually no longer wrote manuals, and those he had written gradually went out of use by 1970, the best and finally only voice for that orthodox religion, that was speaking within the system, was stilled. In fact, according to the testimony of Albert Payne, one of Lowell’s colleagues from the 50s who stayed on into the 70s to work on curriculum for the Church, one person who was brought in over him (a convert from right-wing evangelical Protestantism) took as his self-appointed mission to remove all vestiges of Lowell’s emphasis on social morality from the curriculum.

Lowell, of course, was not bitter about all this. He went on to have two other effective and satisfying careers, as counselor/professor at the U. and as a full-time humanitarian, directing the Community Services Council and his Boys Ranch, helping to establish and guide the Lowell Bennion Community Center at the U., serving his ward as a bishop and teacher, and continuing to serve his neighbors, even the elderly who were younger (and less physically impaired) than he, into his late eighties. And he always remembered the wisdom he found in a Hindu scripture, which served to remind him personally that “to action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits.” That is, we cannot judge our own efforts by how well they succeed, but only by whether they express our integrity and love, the things that matter most.

I have a friend, a thoughtful academic and long-time Church leader, who believes that fifty years from now it is Lowell Bennion whom everyone in the Church will be quoting. I hope and pray he is right, but that prophecy now probably depends most on us who love his teachings, either because we knew him or, increasingly, because we make the effort to find and read his work—and quote and republish and expand upon it. It may depend most on how we take his example to heart, and how we learn to give the gospel new formulations in language that is relevant to the great spiritual and moral issues of the twenty-first century and is translated into a tone that can reach out to others.

For instance, Albert Payne has recently written a little book of theological ruminations for his family, in which, based in Lowell’s example and principles of analysis, he develops a convincing argument that Doctrine and Covenants 76 does not, as it is usually read in the Church, damn certain people, on the basis of their life on earth, to be forever excluded from God’s presence. Instead, it opens up, consistent with a God of unconditional love, a vision of eternal possibilities for us all, even including advancement from kingdom to kingdom. A recent letter in

*Sunstone* asked the independent press to try more ardently to relate gospel insights to current social issues and needs.<sup>14</sup> All of us could use a little mentoring from Lowell Bennion as we take on these tasks, so, in the space remaining, I will review some of his main contributions and books.

### LOWELL'S MENTORS

TWO MAJOR INFLUENCES on Lowell's intellectual development were his father, Milton Bennion, Dean of the School of Education at the U., a long-time leader, including general superintendent, in the Deseret Sunday Schools and the author of *Moral Teachings of the New Testament*, and Apostle John A. Widtsoe, the author of *Joseph Smith, Scientist* and *A Rational Theology*, who was so impressed with the twenty-four-year-old Lowell when he met him in Europe in 1932 that he chose him to found the Salt Lake Institute two years later. But the greatest influence was the German sociologist Max Weber, who had died in 1922 and was still unknown in America in the 1930s but whose increasingly influential work was introduced to Lowell by Eric Voegelin in 1932 in Vienna, where Lowell, after his mission, was studying for a Ph.D. in political science.

Lowell shifted to social philosophy and learned from Weber how to study human behavior as a science, creating "ideal types" and excluding value judgments until understanding was increased and *then* bringing in personal ethics and religion. Bennion's Mormon optimism and concept of eternal progression warmed to Weber's view of science and history as open-ended. Weber's analysis of the Hebrew prophets helped Lowell gain a life-long appreciation for their greatest contribution, which Weber dubbed "ethical monotheism," the idea that deity is ethically consistent with himself and requires us to love and serve his other children as the chief way to approach him. Weber's distinction between the priestly and prophetic functions of religious leaders, the organization-preserving administrator and the radical spokesman for an ethical God, helped Lowell appreciate the value of both kinds of impulses in Mormon leaders and to be loyal to them without being either over-awed by them or troubled by differences between them.

When Hitler came to power and Lowell could see the early stages of anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism in Austria, he transferred to Strasbourg and completed his doctorate in December 1933 under Maurice Halbwachs, a disciple of Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim. His dissertation, *Max Weber's Methodology*, was the first book in English on Weber and the first to summarize and analyze his unique methodological concepts. Despite its small press run, Lowell's book was cited regularly by American Weberians from Talcott Parsons onward and in the fall of 1992 was partially reprinted and evaluated in an article in the *American Sociologist*, "A Piece of Lost History: Max Weber and Lowell Bennion."<sup>15</sup> Thomas O'Dea, the great Catholic Weberian and author of *The Mormons*, whose classes in the sociology of religion Lowell took over when O'Dea left the U. in 1967, once said in a lecture, "[I]f Lowell had really concentrated on Weber when he got back from Europe, he would have preceded [Talcott] Parsons. . . . That would have put him in a position to be the main expert in America."<sup>16</sup>

## THE EARLY WORK

**B**UT, OF COURSE, Lowell Bennion did not take that direction. A hint of where he might go instead could be seen in the chapter of his book which evaluates Weber's ideas on religion. Bennion unapologetically and very cogently surveys Mormon history and thought in order to show how the Mormon experience confirms Weber's thinking about the inadequacy of Marx's historical materialism to explain religious movements. Here is some of the flavor of this work, written when Lowell was about twenty-five:

It is clear that the Mormon ethic based on religious conviction embodies the essential elements of the methodical, rational manner of every-day life indispensable to the spirit of modern capitalism. History has recorded the remarkable achievements of the Mormons in economic undertakings. Social, economic, psychological, as well as religious forces, have greatly influenced this development. Professor [E.E.] Ericksen explains the first stage of Mormon development (1830–1847) as a maladjustment between Mormons and non-Mormons which produced and shaped the Mormon group life. This maladjustment was based chiefly on differences of religious belief, as he clearly states. He then proceeds to interpret Mormon religion and group life as products of this maladjustment. It must be borne in mind, however, that this religious movement which brought about the maladjustment was founded on religious motives and doctrines, the most important of which had been proclaimed before any maladjustment was present. In fact, the very proclamation of the new doctrine preceded any Mormon group life, its being the necessary presupposition for the very existence of the Mormon group.

. . . [The Mormons] made their way to the unknown, barren Rocky Mountain region because Joseph Smith had prophesied in none too enticing words that they would go there and because Brigham Young, their second leader, claimed to have seen the desert in a vision and knew where he was going . . . . The fact that the Mormons remained in the desert, after having seen it and tasted of its "fruits," is hardly explainable from the struggle between nature and man alone.<sup>17</sup>

A year after he wrote that, Lowell had accepted Elder Widtsoe's call to start the institute at the U. and had written his first manual for the Church's sixteen- to eighteen-year-old M-Men and Gleaners, *What About Religion?* His first "Church" book, it is a remarkably engaging and thoughtful application of some of Weber's ideas to an argument to young Mormons to consider religious ideas and feelings as a crucial part of any complete and satisfying philosophy of life. Leonard Arrington, at the memorial service for Lowell at the Salt Lake Institute on March 17, told us that he got a copy of that book as a beginning college student in 1934. As he held his battered copy up before us, Leonard related how he had treasured it all through college and into World War II, carrying it in a foot locker through North Africa to

Italy and back home into graduate school and his beginning scholarly career. He has read it fourteen or fifteen times and finds in it, in embryonic form, all the great ideas of Lowell's later books and manuals such as *The Religion of the Latter-day Saints* and *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*. In it, Lowell summarizes the nature and values of science and experience, but notes their final inability to answer the question, "What ought I to do with my life?" Then he writes:

Consider the two possibilities: (1) a life in which man is left entirely on his own resources to solve the mysteries and problems of life, and (2) a life in which another Being, far superior in intelligence and far richer in experience, points the way and offers a guiding hand. One may argue that both possibilities are challenging. That is true. The difficulty with the first is that it involves a tremendous amount of waste and often disaster and failure. The individual life seems often to be wrecked before one discovers what one ought to do.

The second possibility, in which God plays the directing role, is by no means without a challenge or devoid of the chance of being both ingenious and courageous. No one in his right mind has ever insisted that we know too much or that God has done everything for us. Life is still teeming with problems and questions. Man is still engaged in a struggle with nature, with man, and with himself. The difference in these two proposed possibilities lies in the fact that under the direction of God, we are all sure of our goal and the journey of life can be enjoyable and profitable. . . .

Mormonism claims to be a revealed, and not a man-made, religion. We have seen the need for such knowledge that God could give to man. If that need is felt, then let us consider together in ensuing discussions what the message of religion is and finally on what grounds such a message and answer to our problem rests.<sup>18</sup>

#### LOWELL ON JOSEPH SMITH

AS LOWELL PREPARED his classes at the Institute, two other influences besides his father, Max Weber, and Elder Widtsoe gradually took their central place—Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Brother Bennion found in Joseph Smith a Weberian ideal type, a religious questioner, whose open mind and generous spirit enabled him to reveal the great concepts of the nature of God and humans, of their relationships and potential, that lie at the heart of the Restoration. Lowell gave radio talks on this subject in the 1940s and in 1949 was invited to give the annual Joseph Smith Memorial Lecture at the Logan Institute, where he spoke on the Prophet's "Creative Role in Religion." He reviewed how Joseph received his revelations in response to his own deeply felt questions and desires and how those revelations, including the Book of Mormon, connected gospel principles to involved, creative, living:

The Prophet's own experience with revelation had taught him that God speaks to man when there is a need, when man is aware of that



need, and when man is seeking, learning, desiring, and pleading in humility and faith with a eye single to the glory of God and his work.

It is quite self-evident, I think, that when it comes to living the great principles of religion, faith, humility, and love, they have absolutely no meaning to man unless they are experienced and participated in creatively by man.

Joseph Smith also made of the religious life an everyday creative experience. The Book of Mormon, in particular, is filled with exhortations to us all to have love, charity, compassion, and tolerance for fellowmen.

King Benjamin links theology and religion beautifully when he says: “And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.” (Mosiah 2:17.) A little further along in the same sermon he adds this note: “And now, if you believe these things see that ye do them.” (Mosiah 4:10). . .

I wish time permitted to show you that the priesthood, the gift of the Holy Ghost, temple marriage, as well as baptism and the sacrament, have no power or influence in our lives except as participation in them teaches us the true meaning of discipleship of Christ and inspires us to realize his kingdom. How I love this intimate marriage of the ordinances and ritual of religion with the moral life throughout the works of the Prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>19</sup>

## ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

**I**N 1936, AS a young teacher developing his first Book of Mormon classes, anxious to do the very best by his students, Lowell went to Seattle for the summer and took a course in the archaeology of ancient America at the University of Washington. He studied carefully and read widely in scientific journals. After the course ended, he secluded himself for a week, reading the Book of Mormon and trying to relate his summer’s work to it. He found very little connection. Though he later recognized, in 1985 when he published his *The Book of Mormon: A Guide to Christian Living*, that Book of Mormon archaeology had come a long way in fifty years, he still remained convinced that “the relationship of this book of scripture to external evidence remains problematical because the Book of Mormon peoples were not the only migrations to the Western Hemisphere” and sorting out Nephite or Jaredite remains from others is impossible. But he still valued his study back in 1936, especially that final week of “intensely satisfying,” concentrated reading, in which he “discovered that the Book of Mormon is not a textbook in any science, not even mainly an historical account or a theological treatise,” but “a religious record of three migrations.” It is a book written by prophets whose purpose it is to persuade “people to believe in God, to have faith in Christ, and to forsake evil for good. I felt their faith and resonated to their testimony.”<sup>20</sup>

In the past thirty years, as his Book of Mormon study guides have no longer been used, Bennion's approach has been greatly neglected in Church education and too often forgotten by all sides in the often unseemly battles in the Mormon intellectual community over the "historicity" of the Book of Mormon. Many who write about the Book of Mormon seem more interested in proving, by external evidences, that it is or is not *inspired*—rather than in examining how *inspiring* it is, how well it can move us to Christian faith and Christian living.

Surely, if God wanted to, he *could* provide us the artifacts to prove without doubt that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be. That he doesn't, and that the best efforts of a lot of devoted and reasonably intelligent people (I have tried myself in a few essays) have not moved us very far beyond Lowell Bennion's judgment in 1936—that the proofs of historicity are "problematical." All that *ought* to suggest to us that God doesn't care much about such proof. Perhaps he knows from much experience that simply knowing the scriptures are historically "true" doesn't help much to make his children more faithful or moral—or kind to each other.

It is particularly fitting that Lowell Bennion's week of concentrated rereading of the Book of Mormon produced what to me is his most original and powerful religious insight, one that bears much continued study and further explication. I mean, of course, his insight into the Atonement of Jesus Christ. From Book of Mormon scriptures, particularly Alma 34 and 42, he came to understand that Christ's redemptive work and sacrifice was not so much a *payment* for past sins, a mystical balancing of God's justice with his mercy, as it was a powerful *motivation* to help us overcome future sins—that God was not interested in vicarious punishment (*Atone-ment*) but in healing and bringing us back to him (*At-one-ment*). Lowell saw in the Book of Mormon that people could know through prophecy, even hundreds of years before it happened, as the Nephites did, or could read the scriptural witnesses hundreds of years later, as we do, about the Atonement. Thus, through language and the emotional, psychological, and spiritual power of faith, all mortals can respond to Christ's unconditional love. His suffering in the Garden as he vicariously felt the pain of our shame and guilt and his voluntary death on the cross can move people at any time in history with what the Book of Mormon calls "*means unto repentance*" (Alma 34:15). All believers can receive actual power to change, because Christ's mercy can break the bands of justice within them and release them to a life as new creatures in him.

#### THE POWER OF ATONEMENT

**I** SAW THE power of that great liberating idea, that true principle, when, as a young missionary in Hawaii, faced with a man who knew the gospel was true but couldn't repent, I remembered Brother B.'s insight. I led the man to gain that insight and conviction for himself through reading the Book of Mormon scriptures and saw him change overnight. I learned what it is to apply the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. Many years later, a young returned missionary approached me and told how, during a time on her mission when she was near despair at the black, guilt-ridden despair of a whole branch, she had read an essay of mine in which I summa-

rized Lowell's great insight; she taught that insight into the Atonement to the branch and saw them bloom spiritually with joy and mutual support as they accepted Christ's mercy for themselves and gained the strength to give it to others. This is how Brother Bennion wrote about that idea:

Some theologians in Christendom have thought of the atonement in this way: When Adam fell, through sin, as they believe, all mankind was lost. God, in his anger, became estranged from men and, as it were, turned his back on them. Christ, by dying for the sins of men, restored men to favor in the eye of God, bringing about an at-one-ment between the Creator and his creatures. In other words, according to this view, Christ's mission was *to reconcile God to fallen humanity*.

As Latter-day Saints, we believe God to be the loving Father of all men. Never has he turned his back on them. He is not estranged from men. The opposite is true. Men frequently estrange themselves from God. Men leave God—the fountain and source of their lives and, like the Prodigal Son, go into a far country to spend their lives in riotous living. God, like the Father in the Parable, is waiting for his children to return and is ready to run to meet them.

If we may carry the analogy one step further, we may add that the Father has sent Jesus Christ, his only Begotten Son, to bring man back to him. Christ lived and died not to reconcile God to man, but to reconcile man to God. It is man who must have a new vision, a change of heart, and be born again if he is to be one with God. . . . In speaking of his death on the cross, Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (John 12:46)<sup>21</sup>

No longer do I believe that a person must earn forgiveness. If he had to, then only justice and reciprocity would prevail in relationships between man and man and man and God. But "give" is the main root of the word forgiveness. And there is grace operating whenever anyone is forgiven.

Man is asked to repent to receive forgiveness, I believe, not because the Lord is not forgiving whether we repent or not, but because he knows that man cannot accept forgiveness and renew his life without himself taking some steps to change it.

And Christ is not only forgiving, but he is a source of strength to those who would change their lives so they can be forgiven, not least of all by themselves.<sup>22</sup>

President Hinckley noted, at Lowell's funeral, that the central reality of Lowell's life had been his knowledge and his testimony of the Savior Jesus Christ. Certainly that's true. It is the constant refrain, the steady foundation, of all he wrote. His touchstone for assessing conflicting scriptures was Which are most consistent with Christ's repeated teachings? His model for teaching was Jesus the Master Teacher. His model for Church leadership was Jesus the humble servant of all, who served

with a clear sense of his purpose, focused in people, not in rules or institutions.

Lowell's third major work, next to *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth* and *An Introduction to the Gospel* in quality and value, and like them worthy to be republished—often—is *Teachings of the New Testament*. The last of his “little books” (which, to their credit, Bookcraft and then mainly Deseret Book published in the 70s and 80s when his star was in decline) is *The Legacies of Jesus*. This is what he wrote in its preface in 1990:

Few who have ever lived can equal Jesus of Nazareth in the extent and diversity of his appeal to the people living since his day. Radical feminists and unreconstructed patriarchs, skeptical scholars and those who read the scriptures as totally literal, sinners and saints, rich and poor, revolutionaries and conservatives are drawn to him. Architects, painters, composers, and writers have found in his life and teachings the inspiration for countless works of art.

In this brief work, I explore some of the reasons for his great appeal to me. I cannot do justice to his life or teachings. I cannot argue in a scholarly way for a particular point of view. Rather, I write to express my intense gratitude for what he has come to mean to me. In quiet ways, throughout my life, I have sensed what I hope is a growing closeness to him. As my life draws toward its close, I find myself thinking of him, not only with the love of a lifetime but also with the anticipation of my future.<sup>23</sup>

#### HOLDING ONTO LOWELL

FOR THE REVIVAL and continuation of your interest in Lowell Bennion's legacy that I am advocating here, you should, of course, first get Mary Bradford's biography. Sadly, only one of Lowell's books is currently in print; in order to confirm my claims for the unique quality and continuing value of his thought, you need to dig out old copies of his manuals and books from your own or your parents' libraries or order used copies from places like Sam Weller's, Benchmark, or Alpha Books in Salt Lake City. My collection, *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion*, will give you a sampling of his work to 1988. Two books coming out this year will give you the results of his remarkable continuing output, despite increasing illness, since then. *How Can I Help? Final Selections of the Legendary Writer, Teacher, Humanitarian Lowell L. Bennion* was published in May, and *Unto All Nations: Selected Wisdom from the World's Living Religions* will come out later, both from Aspen Books. I close with a selection from the latter, a book that provides short essays, each on one great idea that Lowell has learned to better appreciate because of its emphasis in one of the great religions. In a time when we aspire to be a truly world-wide and world-class religion, it is a typical, humble reminder of the quality of company we are in, of some things we might still want to learn from others, and of an approach we might take in relation to others that is true to our highest Christian ideals.

The chapters on Judaism and Christianity, toward the end of the book, show

Lowell's consistent devotion, from his early study of Max Weber and the Hebrew prophets to his last writing in his late eighties about the Savior, to a basic idea—that true religion is grounded in social morality at least as much as in pious spirituality, that it is grounded in true living, with Christ as our model, as much as in true doctrine about him:

People have found many ways to worship God: they develop faith in him, they study the scriptures, they participate in rituals, they attend religious services, they pray to him, they offer sacrifices to him, and they praise him in prayer and hymns. However, according to Judaism, none of these behaviors is acceptable to an ethical god unless they are accompanied by decent, honorable living in everyday human relationships. This is the oft-repeated teaching of the prophets of Israel. [Bennion then cites the great Hebrew prophets, Amos and Micah, as they castigate the chosen people, in the name of God, for social injustice.]

These verses for me are absolutely pivotal in the scriptures. They changed my life and how I regarded my religion. I believe that anyone who has read and understood Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, or the words ascribed to Moses will never be the same person again. He or she will know that there can be no spirituality without morality, no true worship of God without equal concern for fellow beings. We will know that the Church is not a substitute for righteous living but one place to go to be inspired to walk out into the marketplace and political corridors of power and transform them into arenas for righteous action—the dealings of human beings with each other. . . .<sup>24</sup>

I read the New Testament as the record of a man who consistently cherished “the least” in his society. It humbles and inspires me when I see him valuing individuals and their needs more than even the revered Law of Moses. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” he rebuked those who questioned his healing on that holy and much-protected day (Mark 2:27). The rules, traditions and regulations that hedged around the Law of Moses were a barrier which he broke, not casually, but persistently when it would have kept him from healing or saving the children of Abraham.

He was never guilty of putting institutional ends above human values. It is natural and easy for all institutions—political, educational, business, and even religious—to make themselves ends in themselves, to measure their worth by profits, growth, and dominion. For Christ, all things in religion—meetings, rituals, and doctrines—were instruments of blessing the lives of men, women and children. He used them to bring individuals nearer to God, to establish good will among people, and to enhance each person's feeling of self-worth.

To me, this message of Jesus is written in letters of fire in the record about him. Anyone who knows or honors Jesus will see the same

power stirring in his heart to put people uppermost, treating them as ends, not as means to ones own ends. As Christians, we will be particularly concerned with those in pain—with the handicapped of mind and body, with the poor, with the lonely, with the elderly, with those who have run afoul of socially acceptable norms, with children, with the enslaved and disenfranchised among nations, with the hungry. A disciple of Jesus will espouse humanitarian causes, contributing both time and means to support those who are doing the master's works. . . .<sup>25</sup>

At the end of the book is the completion of Lowell Bennion's legacy, his final testimony:

I have long pondered the significance of love, which Paul declares to be not only greater than faith but more certain than knowledge. As I have grown older, I have come to understand more clearly the limits of knowledge. Truly we know only "in part" and "see through a glass, darkly." Our experience with knowledge is always limited, tentative, and incomplete while the experience of Christ's love is drenching, profound, and transforming.

The sacred moments when I have tasted of Christ's love have fully satisfied me and simultaneously given me an abiding hunger for more. And I have found that the best way to satisfy that hunger is to express something of the same love to others.

## NOTES

1. Lowell L Bennion, "What It Means to Be a Christian," *Sunstone*, July 1987, also in Eugene England, ed. *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928–1988* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book. 1988). 277.
2. Lowell L. Bennion, "Teaching Religion by Word of Mouth," in *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion*, 150.
3. Chieko Okazaki, "The Leadership Triangle." Talk given 21 March 1996 at the Wright Leadership Symposium, BYU; copy in my possession.
4. Lowell L. Bennion, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 163.
5. Bennion, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, 125–26.
6. Bennion, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, 127.
7. Bennion, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, 21–22.
8. Lowell L. Bennion, *Legacies of Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book. 1990). 26–27.
9. Lowell L. Bennion, "Overcoming Prejudice," in *The Best of Lowell L Bennion*, 249, 253.
10. In Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 133; for an account of a similarly gentle and student-centered exchange on 24 August with Elder Mark E. Peterson on why Negroes were not then allowed to hold the priesthood, see 131–32.
11. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 135.
12. Quoted in Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985), 400.
13. *Official Report of the One Hundred Thirty-Eighth Annual Conference of the Church of*

- Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 5, 6, 7, 1968* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968), 97–98.
14. Sheldon Greaves, “Old Testament Sunstone, New Testament Sunstone,” *Sunstone*, Mar. 1996, 17–18.
  15. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 60.
  16. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 227.
  17. Lowell L. Bennion, *Max Weber’s Methodology* (Paris: Les Presses Modernes, 1933), 132–33.
  18. Lowell L. Bennion, “What Ought I to Do with Life?” in *The Best of Lowell L Bennion*, 176–77, emphasis added.
  19. Lowell L. Bennion, “Joseph Smith: His Creative Role in Religion,” in *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion*, 59–60, 62.
  20. Lowell L. Bennion, *The Book of Mormon: A Guide to Christian Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1–2.
  21. Lowell L. Bennion, *An Introduction to the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1955), 139–140, emphasis in original.
  22. Lowell L. Bennion, “For by Grace Are Ye Saved,” in *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion*, 117.
  23. Bennion, *Legacies of Jesus*, vii–viii.
  24. Lowell L. Bennion, *Unto All Nations: Selected Wisdom from the World’s Living Religions* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, forthcoming), chapter on “Judaism.”
  25. Bennion, *Unto All Nations*, chapter on “Christianity.”

© 2010 Eugene England Foundation. All rights reserved.

How to cite this essay: Eugene England, “The Legacy of Lowell L. Bennion,” *Sunstone* 19, no. 3 (September 1996): 27–44.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact [www.eugeneengland.org](http://www.eugeneengland.org) website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.