



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 6 | Number 2

Article 11

7-1-2005

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bott, Randy L. "Blessing the Church Worldwide: An Interview with Ross H. Cole." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 2 (2005). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol6/iss2/11>

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Blessing the Church Worldwide: An Interview with Ross H. Cole

Randy L. Bott

Ross H. Cole, now retired, was a Church Educational System zone administrator on August 17, 2004, when this interview was conducted.

Randy L. Bott is an associate teaching professor of Religious Education at BYU.

The Religious Educator commissioned this interview with Ross H. Cole, former zone administrator for the Church Educational System.

Bott: *Brother Cole, you have had some remarkable experiences as far as Church service is concerned. Would you review for us briefly the positions you have held and any insights you may have received.*

Cole: Well, my first assignment that had any significance was when I was the first counselor in the mission presidency of the Korean Mission for a year before I came home.

Bott: *Is that while you were a young missionary?*

Cole: Yes, as a young missionary from 1964 to 1965. And the challenge was that I was with the first group of missionaries to open the Korean Mission. Until that time, Korea was a district of the Northern Far East Mission. Because of that, there was quite a drought of missionaries for about nine months, and it meant just a few of us would have heavier assignments for a little while, and I just happened to fall into that. I've had many experiences since then. Most of my Church service was in teaching in the quorums of the Church or Sunday School or auxiliary assignments as I worked through my master's and doctorate. I become an elders quorum president in Fullerton, California, where I had my first institute assignment. I was a high counselor for some years and then a stake president. I was released in 1986 to come

to the headquarters of the Church Educational System as the director of the training division. I was a mission president from 1989 to 1992 in the Korea Taejon Mission. I came back and settled in Orem and was called to be a bishop at BYU for four years. The day I was released as bishop, in April of 1999, I was called to be the stake president in my home stake. I have had wonderful opportunities to serve with some of the finest in the kingdom.

***Bott:** You seem to have had a tremendous interest in the Far East. How did that all start?*

Cole: Well, it started when I was a seminary student. In southern California back in the fifties, they were starting the early-morning seminary program. I was in high school in the latter part of the fifties, so I had an opportunity to go to early-morning seminary. My seminary teacher, Gail E. Carr, had just gotten back from a mission to Korea. He later became the first mission president in Korea. The first week or so of September in my senior year, Brother Carr brought in a Korean man, Lee, Young Bum, who was on his way to BYU to share his testimony. So he came into our early morning class, and he and Brother Carr talked about missionary work in Korea.

Sad to say, I could not have cared less. I was more interested in other things. Part of the problem I had is that he spoke in broken English, so I couldn't understand everything he said, and I felt like, well, why try? It doesn't matter. But at the end he bore his testimony and said something like this, "I pray to God that He will send one of you to my country to teach my people the gospel." And when he said that I felt this warmth go through my soul. I thought, "Oh no! It's me." I wanted to go on a mission, but I never thought of going to Korea. All the rest of the day, I kept reflecting on all the stories he told that were so harsh. I thought, "Oh, man. How can I do that?"

So that night I was sobered, and I prayed, "Heavenly Father, please help me to be worthy to go to Korea on a mission." I had that same prayer every morning and every night for a little over three years until I finally got to Korea in November of 1962. So it changed me. When you pray that hard to be worthy to go to a country, it changes how you feel about that country. That's what happened. So when I got there, I didn't worry about anything except just working hard because I felt like Heavenly Father had answered my prayer and now it was up to me to do everything. So that got me started in Korea.

Well, I learned to love the people, like most missionaries do, and when I came back from my mission, I just kept up my studies

with Korean and Asian studies and graduated from BYU in that area. I received a scholarship to the University of Hawaii, which in that year allowed people from the United States to link up with people from Asia in what they called the East-West Center. So I represented the United States in that area, and Korea was my specialty. I interfaced with many wonderful people and scholars from Asia. It just deepened my interest in and love for Asia. For my master's thesis, I went back to Korea and did a textbook analysis of moral lessons of Korean elementary citizenship education. I had to read all the textbooks, and I got deeper into the culture. Then I graduated and was working on my doctorate at UCLA, and I was heading in the same direction when I got an answer of certitude that I should be in the seminary program, so I left it all to go teach seminary.

Bott: And you have had this fascination with Asia since then?

Cole: I have. Asia was something I never would have thought of when I was a junior in high school, but I haven't been able to get it out of my soul since then. At Arizona State University, I was working on my doctorate, which was a further expansion of my master's study, and I finished in Asian studies. I was teaching seminary and then institute in Fullerton, California; for years nothing happened. I thought, "Why did I bust my pick to do all this work on Korea for no reason?" Then, years later, in 1986 they asked me to come up to the headquarters of the Church and do international training for the professional development program. My assignment was to go around the world and train full-time CES educators, and that's where my education really started coming in handy. I had learned how to look at a culture through the lens of objectivity and how to differentiate between cultural values and gospel values and things that were really significant or not significant in a culture. My education helped me in my training with our CES people around the world.

Bott: How and why did you decide to go with CES when you had that rich background in higher education?

Cole: The absolute truth is I had an answer through prayer. I was asking what the Lord wanted me to do. I thought I wanted to go into the university professorial ranks. That's what I was headed for. Everything in my background suggested I would be able to do well. As I prayed one night, I sought to get confirmation from the Lord on my proposal for my career. One morning about dawn, after praying all night, I got an answer. I was to teach seminary. I was so thrilled that

I went to UCLA the next day and withdrew from all the education classes and financial support. I even had to have an interview with the vice president, who wanted to know why in the world I would withdraw from UCLA, especially with all the financial help. Why would I leave to go do something I didn't even know if I would be able to do? I came into CES midyear and didn't have a contract when I withdrew, but I just said, "I'm going to go teach seminary."

Bott: So where have you taught?

Cole: I started in Tempe, Arizona. I taught high school there. A couple of years after that, I opened up Marcos DeNiza High School for released-time seminary while I was a coordinator for the east Phoenix area, and I also was the Scottsdale Community College Institute director. I did all that in one year while I was doing my residency at Arizona State University. I learned a little bit about stretching myself and about the blessings of the Spirit of the Lord.

Bott: You have been in CES for a long time now. Have you seen changes take place within the program?

Cole: Yes, I have seen many changes, some in how we have organized our pre-service and in-service training. Now we have it all unified. We now have a philosophy of education and a philosophy of leadership well written in handbooks. We have basic principles of teaching that are transferable to every culture. In addition, some of the changes that I've seen have been that our CES people are more willing, I think, to follow the patterns of the prophets. We're interested in hiring people who have great character, spiritual character—those who love the prophets and the apostles and love to teach and model their teachings in their own lives. When you get that kind of CES employee, along with purity of heart and focus upon wanting to keep their covenants in relationship to their profession, all employees have a good basis for motivation, unity, spiritual power, personal accountability, and home behavior. The fundamental drivers in CES are the covenants that we make and then apply to our profession, which yield power. Of course, without humility and meekness we have nothing. The commission of the religious educators of seminary and institute is to live the gospel, teach effectively, and administer appropriately. We stay focused on those three areas and push forward. I am personally pleased with the direction that has been established.

Over the years some changes have occurred in curriculum. In 1980 Jay Jensen and Gerald Lund (both General Authorities now) and

David Christensen were trying to resolve a problem about the curriculum of seminary—whether to have one book for special education, one book for home study, and one book for released-time seminary or to have only one teacher manual. They went on a retreat for several days and came back with a perspective that what was most essential was to teach from the scriptures, to walk the students through them instead of teaching on a conceptual basis. That was the most dramatic philosophical change I know of in curriculum, training and teaching in CES. That was in 1980.

Twenty-five years later we have had two revisions of the seminary manuals, but they just keep going the same direction, only better and deeper. The institute courses are more scripturally inclined by nature, so it didn't require quite as much change in those courses. Our teaching, our training, and our assessment work and refinement in effect are based upon that change that occurred back in 1980.

***Bott:** Are there any other experiences that you have had, maybe in your travels or as you have interfaced personally with students or faculty, where you felt the hand of the Lord literally moving you in a certain direction?*

Cole: I have on many occasions. In fact, I've hardly ever traveled internationally without feeling something akin to a mantle. Now that's not to say that religious educators have a mantle. We don't want to say that, because we don't. But there is a power and an assistance from a divine source that gives you insight, understanding and confidence as well as the questions to ask that will reveal what needs to be known in order to make wise and strategic decisions. Some years ago we went to Mongolia. We didn't know who we were even going to talk to over there. We interviewed several couples and ended up hiring a man who had a doctorate from Moscow University and had been the dean of the school of agronomy at the Agricultural University of Mongolia. He was a bright man whom the Lord had prepared to be a seminary and institute teacher.

We went to Cambodia on the same trip and found a man who had also been trained in Moscow. He had twice evaded the Pol Pot regime's effort to take him to the killing fields. This man married a woman of royalty and was suspected of being educated or of being one of the *literati*; twice they came to take him. One time they gave him a book in French and said, "We'd like you to read this." So he took the book and turned it upside down and spoke to them in gibberish. It so disgusted the people that they slammed the book down and said, "Get rid of him; he doesn't

know anything.” So he was able to escape. His buddies who were with him on that occasion boarded a bus and never came back.

You interview a man like that with three or four other brethren, and you see that there is a depth of character and power of faith, and that is what makes a huge difference in employee selection.

I just got back from Asia in June with Brother Brad Howell. Brad is my replacement in Asia. We needed to hire three people; we went to Taiwan and hired two brethren who have been in training. Then we went to Indonesia. The institute director in Indonesia is going to be retiring, so we needed to find a replacement. The man we interviewed was currently serving in his fourth year as a mission president. When we interviewed him, I had an impression that he was the Lord’s choice. So I talked to him about other priesthood leaders and potential CES employees in Indonesia and, at the behest of the area president, I even asked him if he would be interested in CES. I showed him the salary schedule, and he said, “Oh, we couldn’t live on that.” That night I was frustrated because I’d had that impression. As I prayed through that sleepless night, I had a feeling that I should call him in the morning. When I called him, I said, “President, somehow I feel that I should invite you to please pray about Church education as a career.” He said, “Well, I’ll do that. I’ve had thoughts since yesterday too that at least I ought to ask the Lord if He has an interest in it. I’m going with my wife today out of the area to do a zone conference, so I’ll talk to her and we’ll pray about it.” He sent me an e-mail when I got to Mongolia that said, “We’re very interested in the job.” I was thrilled. That kind of help and inspiration has attended me through my experiences in Asia. Every time we need to hire someone, I figure the Lord will tell us who it is. I believe that the Holy Ghost is working throughout the world in every phase of Church operation. All we are trying to do is please Heavenly Father and do His will, and I have experienced His help.

***Bott:** Over the years, you have been busy, you have been educated, and you have traveled. How do you still maintain balance with your family, the Church, and everything else that you have done?*

***Cole:** Well, first of all, I consider myself a 24-7 servant of the Lord. I figure that comes with the covenants. You can’t sidestep that. So the job is to find what Heavenly Father would have me do and what things are most important to Him. The most helpful key is to communicate well with my wife and to learn from her perspective what is most important as far as family and other obligations that hit us as parents and grandparents. We find that there is enough time to prioritize and*

handle the crucial matters. We have found that if we counsel and plan well together, we can get to the most important things and bless where we need to bless or minister. Sometimes we have to miss opportunities, but people know that we are willing even though it's not always possible to be with them under our circumstances.

***Bott:** If you had to start all over again, are there things that you would do differently?*

Cole: Well, one thing I would do differently is that I wouldn't be so tough on myself the first year. I got neural fatigue the first year of teaching and had to spend part of the summer recuperating, but it taught me balance. It taught me how to organize. I had a dumb idea that every lesson I taught had to be better than the previous lesson. That only took me one semester to realize that I was either going to die or change my philosophy, so I changed my philosophy. Another thing I would do earlier in my life is listen sooner to my wife and bring her in as part of my planning. It took us several years to learn how to balance our family's needs with my Church service and CES responsibilities. Starting over again, I would bring in my wife as a team member who could help me and teach me and coach me. Charlene has been the source of my refinement of character and spirituality and common sense, but I did not listen to her early on in the first couple of years as a I should have. I would have been better off if I had. It is my personal opinion that wives have the strongest influence of any individual in giving feedback to teachers. I learned that early on. I was grateful for that, but I did not bring her in to a full partnership with me as early as I should have.

***Bott:** You have seen so many changes take place. As you look toward the future, what do you see some of our major challenges being as we move into the twenty-first century?*

Cole: Well, one obvious thing is the largeness of the task. The Church going in so many countries in the world; CES follows right behind and tries to provide seminary, institute, and weekday training for the young people. That's a tremendous task. Another one that comes right along with that is the requirement of finding people in a relatively short gospel-living experience to step up and be teachers who model and teach the gospel of Christ from their souls. Finding those who teach the gospel by the Spirit using effective principles of teaching on a daily basis is the miracle of the seminary and institute program worldwide.

Bott: And what about the same challenges as far as being priesthood leaders?

Cole: It is the same. The world is growing in greater disregard for righteousness and goodness, purity and virtue, love and caring, and seems to foster secularism and a social culture that opposes gospel principles. Those influences are everywhere, but because our new converts are meek and humble, and the Spirit of the Lord functions—the Saints seem to rise above the world. The biggest challenge I see is getting everybody to align their hearts and minds with the prophets and apostles. If they yield their hearts not to their own intellectual genius but to the words and the instructions of the prophets, walking in meekness and humility with the Spirit of the Lord, everything is going to be fine.

Bott: How do you take young, upstart teachers and temper them enough so that they don't become so abrasive to the world that they are automatically rejected?

Cole: Well, that's a challenge. It seems to me that if you have a religious educator who is not full of meekness, humility and integrity, you haven't really got a true religious educator; you have got a person posing as one, or a "want-to-be." If you have someone whose character is based upon covenants, who is meek, humble, and pure in heart, such will become the very finest teachers of this time.

Bott: What advice would you give to someone who is just now beginning their career?

Cole: Well, I suppose if they could learn, number one, that the Holy Ghost is *the teacher*. Therefore, all they need to do is to foster the capacity of the young people to desire and work for the influence of the Holy Ghost—that would be the best thing they could possibly do. Another thing is that they need to understand that when they receive the ordinances of salvation and make covenants, those covenants are the basis of relationships—relationships with themselves and Heavenly Father, relationships with themselves and their wives, themselves and their students, themselves and priesthood leaders, themselves and the CES administration. If a person could see that they can integrate their basic covenants with all that they do and in all their relationships, there would be no problem. Everybody would be successful. They would have power and influence. And finally, it seems like to me if a young teacher could just learn that the curriculum that's given to them has been prepared by and has gone through Church correlation—it is what the prophets and apostles expect us to teach—it would be so much easier than all the other

things they may be tempted to bring into a class that may not be as productive to drawing the Spirit of the Lord in the lives of their students.

***Bott:** Over the course of your lifetime teaching, have you seen any change in the youth? Is there a difference in the youth today than there was when you first started teaching?*

***Cole:** Well, of course the world in which they live is now more abrasive to the Holy Ghost. There's so much more of the natural man that's identified and underscored and praised and regarded in our current society that it makes it look like it's an awful lot worse. Now, the world is worse, but I have a hunch that students are just about the same. Every time I see a young person, whether it was when I was just starting to teach or even as late as a few weeks ago when I was with a group of students, I see that when they hear the gospel and they want to please Heavenly Father, they have enabling power and really do well. I do feel that today's youth are much more scripturally literate; they are more gospel-principle-based and more savvy about prophetic teachings as a group than I noticed before. But I still feel that a young person living in any decade who tries to please Heavenly Father will be about the same regardless of the time he or she lives.*

***Bott:** How has being a CES employee impacted your life, your parents, and your family? I guess I'm asking in behalf of those who are either thinking about starting or just starting and saying, "Is it all worth it?" The financial compensation, although adequate, is not anything that would lure you away from the bigger dollars in the future here, but what is in it for you?*

***Cole:** Well, Church education is an awful tough profession if you don't expect to be refined and honed and deepened spiritually in having trials and tribulations that try your character and your heart frequently. If you feel like you don't want that, CES is not the profession for you. If you want to refine yourself and move forward, please the Lord, make a difference in the lives of many, realizing that the cost is going to be your own personal sacrifice of the natural man, and of glory, of honor, of being praised, and of being noticed, then CES is a perfect profession because it allows you to give your very best every day—it allows a reflective mirror in your life. You cannot teach the principles of the gospel with power and have the influence of the Spirit of the Lord in the class without living those gospel principles, and that is the grist of Church education's honing and refining process. Church education invites one to apply the covenants he or she has made to the daily work in the classroom.*

I believe my marriage has been greatly enriched by CES because I find that if I want to teach something, if I'm not living it, I don't have the confidence to teach with power, so I have to change; I have to repent before I can teach with the Spirit. Repenting before you can teach gives you better insights and ideas, but it also allows you to teach with testimony and power. It's part of that same refining and honing process. My wife has been very careful to help me see the difference between what I thought I was doing right and what I should be doing right to see principles in place, not that she is on my case, but in her tender, refined spirituality, she seems to see a little deeper than I see, especially in matters of personality and personal issues.

***Bott:** Have your children been resentful at all, or even teased at all, about you being a seminary man?*

Cole: I don't know. I've never asked them that. But I do know that my children have been greatly blessed by the influence of the students. Early on, the youngsters in high school in my seminary classes would come over to our home. Occasionally I would take my children along, when we'd have an activity at the beginning and end of the year. My children just loved the seminary students. Then, when I was at the university level teaching institute at the university, the students were wonderful. They loved our children, and our children were influenced by them, lifted, and encouraged. I think that they had wonderful models of great young people in their lives. I don't feel like anything has happened poorly in CES. I think what has happened for me is that I had to grow a lot more than I was planning to.

Our family has been blessed another way. Teaching in CES and having for my employment something that of immeasurable value with our remuneration being relatively modest, my wife and I have had to focus on the essentials, the absolute essentials. Family home evening wasn't just good to do; it was an imperative. On Sunday and Monday night every week, we had our family together. We realized that when we took a vacation, it would take a good portion of a year's savings to be able to go and do and invest in our children—so we really made it a teaching experience, a growing experience, a wonderful experience for each of our family. Our children talk about those things frequently now. The construct and the circumstances of our employment gave us a tremendous opportunity to focus on the most essential parts of the gospel.

I have a daughter who is married to a CES man, and she was asked to speak in a conference by Elder Boyd K. Packer. Later with her CES group, one of the things that she bore her testimony about was

that one of the greatest blessings is that our family didn't have much money, that we had to be more careful, so the most essential things were the elements that we focused on. So reading the scriptures is not a casual matter; it is crucial. Family prayer is not a choice; it had to be absolutely the heart and core of our home.

***Bott:** What do you plan to do after you retire?*

Cole: Well, I want to learn how to live a consecrated life. I am being paid a good salary and being blessed in many ways, but I want to turn it back to the Lord. I am looking forward to serving missions. Right now I am serving as a stake president, so when the Brethren decide that that has been long enough, then my wife and I are in a situation to go on missions. We've downsized our home, and we're ready to do whatever the Brethren want us to do under whatever circumstances. We are excited about living a consecrated life.

***Bott:** But in the meantime, until the Brethren release you, how are going to do it?*

Cole: I need to write the second volume of my personal history, we have a lot of family history research to do, and I hope to do a better job as stake president. I want to learn more about the temple, and I want to be a better husband, father, and grandpa.

***Bott:** What would you like to be remembered for?*

Cole: I'd like to be remembered as a man who had the heart and mind of a religious educator, who loved his students and associates, and who loved to mentor them, but I don't think that is what I will be remembered for. I'm probably more remembered honestly for the associates I've had with the CES professional development program.

***Bott:** Why don't you talk a little more about that program. What was it, and what was your role?*

Cole: In 1980 there was a pivotal decision that we would teach the scriptures sequentially rather than teach concepts out of the scriptures. In 1984 there was another meeting with now-Elder Jensen, now-Elder Lund, and Dave Christensen, where they talked about what kind of instructional support we give to teachers to be able to teach out of the scriptures with power. And in 1985 we had a group of brethren who went through all the talks of the prophets to CES, including the summer schools that used to be held at BYU, and identified the most frequently talked-about principles that seem to be most fundamental

for CES educators to do. We formalized those principles as the ethics of CES; we developed a philosophy of teaching and leadership based upon principles of edification as taught in the scriptures and the words of the prophets. It took almost ten years to work through the entire CES population.

Bott: Have you ever encountered culture interfering with the gospel?

Cole: Well, daily. Let me give you an example. It's a very great challenge for our people here in the United States to set aside all the things *they* want to teach to young people. But the best thing may be to select what things are most essential for the young people to know or to feel in order for them to identify, incorporate, and apply gospel principles and then let them teach each other. In the United States we have an intellectual culture that militates against that particular perspective.

It is axiomatic that most people will teach as they have been taught in their own educative years. My experience is that there is no national culture whose educational philosophy perfectly squares with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every culture has some elements which blend easier with gospel principles and also elements which are in direct contrast to gospel values. I am pleased that the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly "supracultural"—it contains the finest elements of any culture, but at much higher levels and degrees. One thing I learned about teaching and training internationally is that the very best thing to do is to get someone behind closed doors, give them the principles, and then work with them for maybe four, five, eight hours. Whatever it takes until they really get it. Let them train the faculty; they understand all the nuances. They also understand the principles of the gospel. Then when you leave; you haven't taken anything with you. You leave it all right there.

Bott: So instead of you teaching the masses there, you teach the one and let them teach.

Cole: That is what I learned. I learned that generally you do not teach much unless the heart and mind are softened and in tune with Heavenly Father and the teacher is willing to be meek and humble. Once that occurs, then we can do anything.