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The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928-1988 Lowell L. Bennion

Kenneth W. Godfrey

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Reviewed by Kenneth W. Godfrey, Utah North Area Director for the LDS Church Educational System.

The last two decades have seen Lowell L. Bennion become both a legend and hero of Mormon intellectuals. If the Latter-day Saints, like the Catholics, officially bestowed sainthood, he would certainly be a leading candidate. Mary Bradford, a former Bennion student, is busily engaged in writing his definitive biography, and a University of Utah chair has been funded and named in his honor. Recently inducted into the Utah Hall of Fame, Lowell is the subject of an essay written by Douglas Alder, another former student, in a recently published book about great institute teachers. Now a volume containing thirty-three of his best essays chosen from more than 120 of his articles and books written while living a life spanning more than eighty years, has been published by Deseret Book Company. His life and thought, while gentle, filled with charity, kindness, and love, certainly had its share of controversy and even some disappointment.

A little less than thirty years ago, he was, by Church officials, relieved of his assignment as director of the Salt Lake Institute of Religion for reasons that are still clouded. For years before that, many Church conservatives were uncomfortable with some of his doctrine, which they considered too “humanistic,” too “liberal,” and possessing an “uncertain sound.” At the same time, hundreds,
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if not thousands, of his former students, many now college presidents, corporate executives, intellectuals, and governmental officials, postulate that they would not have remained faithful Church members if not for the hours they spent in Lowell L. Bennion’s institute classes and at his home.

Professor Eugene England, one of Bennion’s brightest and most gifted students, begins this book with a short biographical essay. Insightful and clearly written, England acquaints us with a man who loved old trucks, cows, whole milk that he had drawn himself, homemade bread, the Hebrew prophets (especially Amos, Hosea, and Micah), Jesus, the world’s impoverished, Max Weber, writing, humanism, and the merciful aspects of the restored gospel. Though England graduated from the University of Utah and received a Ph.D. from Stanford University, he ranks Lowell L. Bennion as the best teacher he ever had. Thus, he could perhaps not be faulted too much if his introduction fails to deal with the controversial aspects of Bennion’s life. That is not the purpose of the essay nor the objective of the articles he has compiled. Rather, England wants us to know something of the greatness of the man before introducing us to his writings.

Certainly a person born and reared in Salt Lake City’s east bench and educated in Utah’s public schools and universities must have had unique capabilities to have completed his Ph.D. in German universities, then considered the finest in the world, written his dissertation in English, defended it in French, and have it published in book form in English—the first English translation, we are told, of the thought of the great German intellectual, Max Weber. Bennion, intellectually, is certainly not an ordinary man. It is unusual, too, that a person so well educated at a time when few Latter-day Saints were so blessed, did not become a university president or a General Authority. Yet he accomplished more and his legacy will probably last far longer than many of his contemporaries who did become college presidents, Church leaders, and powerful politicians.

Perhaps the clue as to why Lowell Bennion did not achieve the same positions as did many of his less gifted contemporaries is found in his writings, which to a great extent reflect his philosophy of life. Early in his career, Bennion concluded that “the important thing is not getting somewhere but being something” (31). The supreme value of life, he says, “is life itself” (30). Other values which he deemed of greatest importance were health, trust, aesthetic sensitivity, human relationships, integrity, creativity, and truth. Over and over again in his essays he condemned, as did one of his favorite prophets, Amos, the outward forms of religion. If
the disciple lacks the character that gives activity and worship its substance, then mere attendance to duty amounts to nothing. His emphasis was on justice, mercy, humility, and doing good to all men. Bennion writes far more about hope than pain, more about optimism than pessimism, more about compassion than punishment, and more about becoming a celestial person than attaining the celestial kingdom. He, early in life, cleansed his whole being of bigotry, and long before blacks could receive the priesthood, contended that denial of such a blessing to so many of God’s children was neither scriptural nor right. Strangely, he has been silent regarding women’s issues, though his writing provides clues that he probably favors much of the women’s rights movement.

Bennion’s essays range broadly and include tributes to close friends, dating skills, principles of a happy marriage, the first principles of the gospel, how to keep religious faith while in college, and how to teach effectively. In fact, one of his most creative and insightful sentences comes from an article written for his fellow Church educational system teachers. He said, “A student should not come out of a class in religion with all the prophecies dated, the celestial kingdom landscaped, the past and future of the Creator understood and himself ready to step into a place in the councils of Deity” (151). It would appear from his writing that his life, his thoughts, and his feelings were centered on the things that most of us would agree matter most. Amos, Hosea, and Micah impress him far more than Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. The Sermon on the Mount means more to him than the theology of Paul. He prefers John, the apostle of love, to the writer of Hebrews; he favors those parts of the book of Alma which teach us about faith, to the more doctrinal aspects of the Book of Mormon. His life, his teaching, his philosophy, and his religion are so people-centered and so filled with faith in the basic goodness of all mankind that to have Lowell Bennion as your judge would indeed make the final appearance before the bar a pleasure. Perhaps he mirrored Christ as he truly is.

Just as he found good in all men and in all religions, so Bennion helped college students discover the positive in the various academic disciplines they encountered. Many of his articles and books were specifically designed to aid students to increase their faith and commitment during the years they were at the university. His was a reasonable, practical approach to life, college, and learning, because truth was a unifying force not a divisive one. Latter-day Saints were only committed to believe and have faith in that which was true, never in what was false.
These essays compiled by Professor England display a man who loved life, lived it to its fullest, found joy in a sunrise, a mountain, a child, a simple hymn, a teenage boy, a college president, an Apostle, and in working with the poor and the misfits of society. He even found happiness in growing old because that too was part of God’s plan.

Many years ago, having just finished a Ph.D. and having been appointed director of the Stanford Institute, I invited Lowell to give a devotional talk to the students the same week he was in Palo Alto for a “Know Your Religion” lecture. Following his noon forum address we spent two or three hours walking the oak-lined walks of the Stanford campus. He taught me some great lessons that day regarding honesty, compassion, and love that I have never forgotten. He seemed unconcerned about such matters as power, position (either ecclesiastical or political), wealth, or fame. Indeed, he exemplified in life his philosophical creed which is reprinted in the biographical essay that begins this book:

Learn to like what doesn’t cost much.
Learn to like reading, conversation, music.
Learn to like plain food, plain service, plain cooking.
Learn to like fields, trees, brooks, hiking, rowing, climbing hills.
Learn to like people, even though some of them may be different... different from you.
Learn to like to work and enjoy the satisfaction doing your job as well as it can be done.
Learn to like the song of birds, the companionship of dogs.
Learn to like gardening, puttering around the house, and fixing things.
Learn to like the sunrise and sunset, the beating of rain on the roof and windows, and the gentle fall of snow on a winter day.
Learn to keep your wants simple and refuse to be controlled by the likes and dislikes of others. (xxiii)

In a general priesthood meeting sermon delivered in 1968 and repeated in this book (198), Lowell Bennion told a story about his ninety-year-old mother who, when the power went off in her home, was telephoned by an anxious daughter who said, “I will come and bring dinner.” “No, thank you,” the aged mother replied. “What will you do if the power does not come on?” the child asked. She answered, “I will light a candle and play my guitar.” Lowell Bennion has lit many candles over his eighty years, and the music of his philosophy, his religion, and his teaching will never die out.

We can forgive the repetition that spans these essays. Though we grow tired of reading over and over the same quotes from Amos, Hosea, and Micah, we are mining a rich enough shaft that we can...
overlook the ore that we have shoveled before. For those who are caught up in the web of achieving excellence and attaining power, who seek the perch of position and the fame of fortune, and who find themselves frequently depressed, disappointed, and about to compromise their integrity, a night spent reading this book will probably be better than most things they could do. Furthermore, those who enroll in seminars on how to deal with stress, or how to make a marriage richer; or those who fear God and his judgment, will find the Bennion essays most satisfying. Lowell Bennion knew how to teach, how to preach, and how to write, but what is more important he knew how to live.

While England has compiled an uncommon book of essays, at least two questions beg answers. Why are the Bennion writings of the 1940s and 1950s strikingly similar to those he penned in the 1980s? Was it because he discovered the “truth” early in his life and felt no need to change? Or did he simply stop reading, thinking, and growing? Secondly, why was it that a man who wrote so much about love, kindness, humility, mercy, and grace, could engender such strong opposition to many of his ideas and, furthermore, induce many conservatives to become his enemies?

We hope that the forthcoming Bradford biography will answer these and other questions, regarding this very complex thinker. Because for all his homespun philosophy, his straw hats, his old pickup trucks, his Idaho farm for boys, and his simple lifestyle, Lowell L. Bennion was a most uncommon man.