

A Review Essay and Bibliography

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LOWELL BENNION

By Eugene England

Lowell Bennion, one of the major forces in the intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of twentieth-century Mormonism, turned eighty on July 26. As a fitting conclusion to his eightieth year, in which he has published his twentieth book, The Unknown Testament (Deseret Book, 1988) and been awarded the prestigious Richard D. Bass Award for Distinguished Service in the Humanities, we publish this intellectual history, review, and bibliography.

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF THEE?
BUT TO DO JUSTLY, TO LOVE MERCY,
AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH THY GOD.
(MICAH 6:8)

A UNIQUE FIGURE AND VOICE ENLIVEN—AND HAUNTS—late twentieth century Mormonism. The figure is stooped slightly forward, dressed in work clothes or inexpensive, sometimes mismatched pants and jacket, with blunt farmer's hands protruding, and a browned face and pate, only a fringe of sandy, greying hair. That figure was seen driving to teach religion at the Salt Lake Institute or sociology at the University of Utah or delivering donated food to a Salt Lake widow, all in the same battered 1946 Ford truck. He was seen, awkward in academic robes, delivering the baccalaureate address at the University of Utah and, more comfortable in grubby levis, boots, and straw hat, teaching city boys how to ride a horse and to build a pole barn in the Teton Valley. He was seen giving a Brigham Young University devotional address, instructing a conference of Mormon Sunday School teachers, conducting sacrament service as bishop of a Salt Lake City ward and, now with the hint of a shuffle added to his unhurried, bent-forward gait, moving from session to session at the Sunstone Theological Symposium.

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Lowell Bennion's voice is not elegant, but rather rough and homey, quite informal and unself-conscious, even when delivering a talk on preparing for a happy marriage to an LDS General Conference. He is completely fearless, almost old-fashioned, outspoken against unchastity, drugs, intellectual pride, Mormon materialism and prejudice—and willing to be heard and published anywhere. Until authors were no longer identified in the 1970s, his name appeared more often than any other in LDS Church lesson manuals for all auxiliaries. He has spoken in more essays and books, over a greater variety of subjects, than perhaps any other contemporary Mormon. He is the only one to have written for virtually every official and independent Mormon periodical of the twentieth century.

Why do that voice and figure haunt—as well as enliven—us? Brother Bennion is among the gentlest and meekest of men, constantly conciliatory and non-confrontive. However, in a time when our quick growth in numbers and material blessings tempt us Mormons to forget some important things, his teaching and writing—and especially his life—provide us our clearest, most challenging reminders of the central message of the Hebrew prophets and Christ, reaffirmed by the prophets of the Restoration: that true religion is based in social morality. His voice has spoken, for nearly sixty years, with a simplicity and clarity like water in a dry land, in favor of *positive*, integrated religion, in support of a holistic philosophy of life, grounded in affirmative and universal principles. For him, religion is based not in strictures or dogmatic theology or ingenious, ever-changing programs and anxious performance. His faith is based in Joseph Smith's revelation of the truth that all humans are co-eternal with God—the same kind of beings and thus co-creators with him: Their basic natures are fulfilled and moved to progression through receiving unconditional love and being given opportunities to love and to serve creatively the needs of all such God-like beings, including themselves.

We are haunted by this unique voice because we know that at times we have discriminated against others because of their race or sex. We know that sometimes we value programs over people and sometimes break hearts rather than break rules—or sometimes prefer “right doctrine” to simple justice and mercy. We

know that with all our growth and great buildings and high activity we sometimes forget the fatherless and widows, the naked and those in prison, the ones right among us as well as strangers and foreigners. We know how hard it is, with busy schedules and a favorable image to maintain and the cumbering responsibilities of a worldwide church, to remember “the least of these.”

Brother Bennion is one who has not forgotten. Without patronizing or condemning, he has taught and written to remind us. And he has set a constant, humble example for us. At the same time—and this, I believe, is the reason his ideas and example will continue to haunt us, the reason he will long be a gentle but piercing reminder—he has provided the most unified picture we have of our theology and the clearest explication of its central doctrines concerning Christ’s atonement and the way of salvation. The force of his intelligence and teaching skills, as well as his leadership and involvement in public and personal service, have unforgettably touched his students and will continue to move those who read him to new vision and practical courage.

Lowell Bennion is a better teacher than writer, but his best essays and sermons convey the teacher. Like every one of his class presentations, each is focused on a single, fundamental, clear idea, usually one that is repeated in other forms and combinations elsewhere in his work. He does not provide answers to questions, as if religion were simply a dogmatic set of answers. For him, as he believes it was for Christ, religion is rather a unified set of tools, principles, ideas, and feelings that can provide a permanent, growing basis for dealing with the bewildering variety of questions and challenges that life poses. It thus can help persons fulfill their deepest natures as children of God. One of his students, who entered the “U” in 1950, remembers attending Bennion’s small LDS Institute classes, where there was no indoctrination but members were led to express their developing thoughts and feelings. “That thrilled me,” he says. “It confirmed my soul. For the first time in my religious learning I felt the teacher was genuinely interested in the questions he was asking, not simply looking for a set answer, that he was interested in *me* and my response. We were soon sitting on the edge of our seats trying to help *him*—and that was the best help for *us*!”

I went to the U from 1951 to 1957, interrupted by a mission to Samoa. I took classes from Brother B., as we called him, and his colleagues and participated in Lambda Delta Sigma, the LDS fraternity/sorority that they had created to provide social and service and spiritual experience to balance their students’ intellectual studies. This was the “Golden Age” of LDS Church education. The faculty at the Salt Lake Institute during that time—Brother Bennion, T. Edgar Lyon, George Boyd, and Elder Marion D. Hanks (who continued teaching there after being called as a General Authority in 1952)—was indeed what Sterling McMurrin identified, on an evening in October 1986 when he and others honored Brother B., as the finest religion faculty ever to grace the Church. They were not only brilliant thinkers and teachers and devoted Latter-day Saints; they were deeply involved, and were *known* by their students and others to be deeply involved, in serving the

poor and deprived throughout the Salt Lake Valley. They spoke with the unique authority of practicing Christians.

Almost every Saturday Brother B. would accompany a Lambda Delta Sigma chapter or two as they cleaned the yard and painted the house of a widow or elderly couple in the Valley. His students saw him delivering food in his truck. We knew from personal experience that Elder Hanks sometimes spent a stormy winter evening driving around helping people stalled in the snow, and we had heard that when all the hotels refused rooms to black athletes visiting in Salt Lake, his family took them in. When that faculty told us the Gospel was true and that it called us to a life of selfless service, we believed them. When they told us to be patient about the Church’s denial of priesthood to blacks, that such a practice did not prove either that God was a racist—punishing blacks or that Christ’s Restored Gospel was untrue, we trusted them.

Bennion’s approach to teaching, which greatly influenced the rest of his faculty and gradually influenced his many students, was based partly on the example of his father, who was known as one of the finest Socratic teachers in the Church. But Brother B. added a unique perspective of his own, which he articulated early in his missionary journal and has both preached and practiced consistently for sixty years: that any religious principle must be consistent within its whole context, particularly the great and repeated fundamentals (including Christ’s teachings), and that its reliability is greatly strengthened by verification through a variety of ways of knowing: reason and experience as well as authority and the witness of the Spirit. This seems simple and obvious enough, but the consequences are enormous for how religion is taught and learned and lived—and that approach was not only unusual compared to most religious instruction in the Church when Bennion developed it, but it remains all too novel today.

The orthodox standard of teaching in the Church auxiliaries and seminaries, which even influences institutes and college religions classes, is still to ask “What word am I thinking of” questions designed to fit a set outline, with evidence provided only by quotation of authority or telling of sentimental anecdotes. There is another way, the way Bennion has demonstrated was taken by Christ, whom he calls “the Master Teacher,” and by the great teacher/prophets of the scriptures. It insists on consistency, openly invites skepticism of itself, and offers a variety of proofs, even asking us to conduct “an *experiment* upon my words” (Alma 32:27). It is aimed at providing foundation principles for dynamic development, not static answers.

I remember a class at the Institute in about 1953 on the nature of God, in which a student asked why, if God is no respecter of persons, as the scriptures and common sense clearly indicate, a difference existed in God’s church between blacks and whites. I immediately answered, as I had been taught in Sunday School and seminary, “Well, God is also a God of justice, and blacks were not valiant in the pre-existence and are suffering the natural consequences.” Brother Bennion—who in my experience was not an antagonist of the Church on this issue and never mentioned it except when directly asked—in the discussion following my remark pronounced no answers. He simply asked me how I knew blacks

had not been valiant. When I had no answer but tradition, he gently suggested that the God revealed in Christ would surely let blacks know *what* they had done wrong and how they could *repent*, rather than merely punishing them—and since God had done no such thing it seemed best to believe blacks had been, and were, no different spiritually from the rest of us. My life was changed, and not merely on this issue. I realized with stunning clarity that many of my beliefs, ones that profoundly affected my relationships to others, were based on flimsy and unexamined evidence—and were directly contradictory to great Gospel principles like the impartial fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of humankind and the unconditional Atonement, which gave sufficient power to *all* to repent and be both saved and exalted.

That crucial change in me was not imposed from outside by authority. It was educated, educed, led out of me by Brother Bennion. I was able to watch how he did it not long after I left the U. I was sent by the Air Force to study to be a weather officer at M.I.T. in Boston, and Brother B. visited our Cambridge Branch on the way to New York to meet his son returning from a mission in West Germany. The Sunday School lesson, on home teaching, was being taught in the standard orthodox manner (“What priesthood must the junior companions hold? Each month home teachers bring . . . what? . . . to every member of the ward? . . . Well, yes, ‘love’ and ‘help’ are good answers, but I was thinking of ‘a message’”). The class, as usual, was bored. Knowing how much this pained him, I waited for Brother B. to rise in prophetic fury and denounce the teacher, the lesson manual, or the class. After a while (*he* was waiting, I realized later, for me or someone else to take the lead), Bennion did raise his hand. He simply asked, with what we all recognized as genuine, uncondemning interest, why, since home teaching was obviously such a wonderful program, true to fundamental gospel principles and human needs, we had such a hard time doing it. He didn’t say another word, but we had the best, most honest and helpful and mutually supportive, discussion I remember in that branch. I learned what I should have had sense to see he was teaching us earlier at the U, that *any* member of a class or group—even a large audience—can make the learning situation more successful, by lovingly and sincerely struggling toward integrated basics: fundamentals rooted in the eternal, universal human needs as revealed by Christ.

Brother B. is the best teacher I have known. I believe he is also the best practical philosopher the LDS Church has produced in the twentieth century: He is both the best thinker about the great theoretical principles on which practical, living religion is based and the best practitioner of those principles. He is good evidence for his own favorite scripture, quoted at the beginning of this essay, in which the Hebrew prophet Micah tells us that, instead of programs and performance, even instead of sacrifice, what the Lord wants of us is justice and mercy and humble love of him and what he stands for—what Christ called “the weightier matters.” All over the world there are former students and colleagues, in business offices and classrooms and kitchens and slums, who go about doing good to “the least of these,” Christ’s brothers and sisters, because of the teaching and example of Lowell Bennion.

This essay is intended to help that tribe increase, by recommending Brother B. to new minds and hearts.

There are now two Bennion memorials at the University of Utah, the new Lowell L. Bennion Center for Community Service and the education building, named after Lowell’s father, Milton Bennion, Dean of the College of Education and Professor of Philosophy at the U. and later head of the LDS Sunday Schools. Milton’s *Moral Teachings of the New Testament* and many essays and reviews in Church and professional journals remain a significant contribution to religious education, and he was, of course, a major influence on his son Lowell. Others of great influence were Arthur Beeley, who taught Lowell sociology and involved him in a study of the social habits of young men in Salt Lake Valley before his mission, and Elder John A. Widtsoe, LDS Apostle and head of Church Education, who was so impressed when he met him while he was studying in Vienna in 1932 that he hired him two years later, as a mere twenty-six-year old, to head the new Salt Lake Institute of Religion.

These men influenced Bennion strongly towards rational religion and towards an attempt to integrate all human scholarship and experience with the Gospel. Both of these emphases fit naturally with his interest in the German philosopher and developer of the sociology of religion, Max Weber, who had died in 1922. But before he wrote his dissertation on Weber, Lowell got married and served a mission in Germany and Switzerland, and Merle joined him in Europe for his graduate work. His diary effectively reveals Bennion’s intense interest in individuals and relationships. His published writings are all modest, even shy, using personal experiences as Christ used parables, only to teach or illustrate principles, not to reveal or examine himself. Therefore, the diary is unique in suggesting the range and depth of his personality and in detailing his spiritual experiences and humble service. Those certainly helped produce the ethical idealism and personal piety that have characterized Bennion’s work as much as its rational brilliance and coherence. For instance, on 13 October 1930, he writes, after some self-analysis, “I still have a big fight on—sometime—somewhere.” On 23 October, “We were called to bless sister Ringger. It fell my lot to seal the anointing and I enjoyed a sweet spirit, promising her health.” On Christmas day, “I feel very responsible to other people and not quite as selfish as I used to. I hope the Lord will see fit to lead me in paths of enlightened service for my fellows. I wish I could increase the faith of other people in God.”

Lowell had graduated from the U in 1928 at age nineteen, because he had skipped two grades. He was married on September 18 and left for his mission one month later. Lowell was extremely lonely without Merle and wrote his diary, full of longings and passionate endearments, essentially as letters to her. He yearned for the time when he could share his experiences and spiritual growth and the culture of Europe with her directly, and a plan to make that possible slowly formed and was realized when his father, who must have sensed his potential, offered to pay his way while he stayed on to do a doctorate at a European university. He studied at Erlangen in Germany and the University of

Vienna, where he was introduced to Weber's work by Erich Voegelin. When Hitler came to power and there was growing hostility, even danger to American students, he went to Strasbourg, France, where he finished his dissertation under Maurice Halbwachs. He had done the research in German and had to defend his work in French, but at Halbwachs's suggestion, he used English for his book, *Max Weber's Methodology*, publishing it in Paris in 1934, the first book-length study of Weber in English.

Bennion compares Weber to Karl Marx, tracing the similar origins of their work in the effort to understand humans in the context of the modern capitalistic order and analyzing their very different conclusions. He shows how Weber's passion to found his work in objective, "value-free" methodologies keeps him from the propagandistic and dogmatic tendencies of Marxism. There is strong evidence for the continuing influence of Weber on Bennion in a long essay he wrote for his sociology students at the U in 1972 and in an informal speech he gave in 1982, in which Bennion reviews his own life as a sociologist and Weber's main ideas. In one chapter of his dissertation Bennion uses Mormonism as a test case to illuminate both the strengths and weaknesses of Weber's method. Valuable in itself as an analysis of the interplay of economic and religious forces, it also demonstrates Bennion's ground-breaking contributions to Mormon scholarship. Except for E.E. Ericksen's *The Psychological and Ethical Aspects of Mormon Group Life* (1922), it was the first such scholarly analysis of Mormonism by a Mormon.

The Bennions returned to Salt Lake City on New Year's Day, 1934, penniless and jobless at the bottom of the Depression. Their first child, Laurel, born in France, had died of an infection at six months. Lowell got work as an education director for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Salina and then in Soapstone, Utah, where he and Merle lived in an abandoned sheep camp. In the fall he was asked to head the new Salt Lake Institute, where he remained until 1962, interrupted only by a two-year term as the first director of the Tucson, Arizona Institute. He managed in the early part of 1934 to write his first Church manual, *What About Religion?*, a practical study of how religious feelings develop and affect our everyday lives, very much influenced by his knowledge of Weber's studies of world religions and religious forces. In 1937 Bennion's growing reputation led President Hugh B. Brown of the British Mission to invite him to write five articles for *The Millennial Star*. They show his growing confidence, first expressed in his mission diary when he was studying a variety of great religious and philosophical texts, that a life under the possibility of God's existence is not only intellectually defensible but exciting, challenging and much less wasteful than the alternative. He was increasingly convinced—and able to convincingly express—that life is purposeful insofar as it is meaningful, that is, as it is based on clearly conceived principles related to universal human needs. By 1939 his experience in developing a curriculum and in teaching and counselling college students provided the basis for a review and a long essay on teaching for *Week-day Religious Education*; the periodical of the Church Education System; for another MIA manual, *Youth*

and *Its Religion*; and for the first version of probably his most important book: *The Religion of the Latter-day Saints*. That book became the standard theology text for the LDS Institutes for many years, and based partly on his ideas in it, Bennion in 1955 wrote *An Introduction to the Gospel*—which became the standard Sunday School manual for another fifteen years and is still the best systematic version of Mormon theology. It reflects Bennion's characteristic struggle against the general Mormon tendency to "pulverize" the Gospel, to analyze and defend and explain it in small chunks which may have no logical connection and may, in fact, contradict each other. It gives coherent moral and spiritual force to Mormon thought.

During the 1940s Bennion studied the intellectual contributions of Joseph Smith in restoring the Gospel and gave radio talks in Salt Lake and the annual Memorial Lecture at the Logan Institute on the creative mind and generous spirit of the founder of Mormonism. He developed his orthodox, common-sense views of courtship and marriage, based on an analysis of three kinds of love—unconditional or Christ-like, friendship, and romance. He taught the need to build a relationship firmly on the first and second before the third can play its powerful, important role. And he continued to express his ideas in a variety of forums: Primary, Sunday School and MIA manuals, Relief Society lessons, Institute curriculum materials, and his first essay for the Church's major official magazine, *The Improvement Era*, "The Fruits of Religious Living in This Life"

In the 1950s and 1960s Bennion became the most prolific Church writer, producing many additional lesson manuals, three major books, and scores of articles for the *Era* and the *Instructor*. There were periods in the early 60s when he had an article in every single issue of both those main Church periodicals and his manuals were being used by two or three separate classes in both the Sunday School and the MIA, in English and also in a number of foreign languages. During the 1950s he was invited by BYU President Ernest Wilkinson to give devotionals on four occasions and by University of Utah President Ray Olpin to give the Baccalaureate Address at the 1956 graduation. President David O. McKay asked him to speak at General Conference in 1958 and again in 1968 (apparently the only lay Church member so honored). He was asked to keynote a "Religion in Life Week" at the University of Colorado and to speak at the Deseret Sunday School Union Conference in 1962, and he addressed an "Interfaith Dialogue" of Salt Lake religious leaders on aspects of Mormonism in 1963 and 1964.

During this time of intense intellectual effort Bennion was continuing his commitment to practical religion, not only through Lambda Delta Sigma but also by developing a Boys Ranch in Teton Valley, near Driggs, Idaho. Since his sociological study of Salt Lake boys in 1927 he had felt the need to provide urban youth with the opportunities for outdoor work and recreation that had blessed him as a boy. A friend offered financing, Bennion searched all over Mormon country until he found the right ranch, and aided by the boys themselves (two sessions of forty each summer), he built the dormitories, lodge, and barns. He continued this unique service, at less than cost, helped by young counselors and reduc-

ing or eliminating fees for the needy, for over twenty years, from 1962 to 1984, when his health would no longer permit. Now former students and counselors are planning to reopen the ranch. I know many—friends, children of friends, and my own children—who remember with enormous pleasure and gratitude the work and responsibility and cooperation, the faith-building discussions and counseling, at the ranch. They were blessed by a utopian vision which Brother B. made into a reality.

In 1962 Bennion left the Salt Lake Institute to become assistant (and later associate) dean of students and professor of sociology at the University of Utah. He had been courted for a full professorship by various departments of the U throughout the 1950s, but had loved what he later called “the most complete relationship I have ever had with students” at the LDS Institute too much to leave voluntarily. So why did he finally leave? Bennion’s only public comment has been, “The LDS Department of Education decided to relieve me of my duties as Director of the Institute. I was invited to write courses of study, but I decided to leave the system.” He will not discuss the matter, even in private, but it seems to me there was and is deep pain in him about this. His colleagues who were at the Institute believe that certain Church administrators were unhappy with his “liberal” qualities, particularly his emphasis on the social gospel and his conviction that the Church’s policy on blacks and the priesthood was inconsistent with the restored gospel. The relatively low percentage of total university students enrolled at the institute became a reasonable excuse to change directors in favor of a more aggressive recruiter and to keep Bennion on in some useful but less visible capacity, such as writing courses of study. However, the whole matter was handled in a way that communicated suspicion and ingratitude—and much offended him. That he could respond with patience and charity to what must have seemed a repudiation of his life’s work is for me a major demonstration of his Christian character. He left rather than be humiliated but exhibited no rancor. In fact, he used his moral authority with his students and colleagues to stop their intended efforts to launch campaigns in his favor. But his departure was a tragic—and from the perspective of twenty-five years later, seems an irreparable—loss to Church education.

For awhile Bennion continued to produce manuals and articles for Church magazines, and continued to serve on the YMMIA General Board and the Church’s powerful Youth Correlation Committee (which met weekly to approve and coordinate all Church materials for youth). In 1968 he was asked to speak again in General Conference. But he was not asked to speak again at BYU, and his Church Education curriculum materials were gradually phased out. By 1970 his manuals were less and less used and he was not invited to write new ones. His writing appeared only rarely in official Church magazines, and after the new magazines appeared in 1971, he had only one major essay and three short responses to “I have a question” in *The New Era*. Nothing by him was ever accepted by the *Ensign*, apparently as a matter of policy, despite repeated submissions, even at the invitation of a General Authority.

In the 1970s and 1980s Bennion’s voice has continued to be heard, but mainly through a series of short and quite popular books, published by Bookcraft and Deseret Book, and in various independent or non-official journals and forums. The books show Bennion’s remarkable variety of expertise: a partial listing ranges from *Husband and Wife* and *On Being a College Student* (1972), to *The Things that Matter Most* (1978) and *Jesus the Master Teacher* (1980), to *The Book of Mormon, A Guide to Christian Living* (1985) and just this year *The Unknown Testament—on the Old Testament*. His essays and talks have become fewer but more powerful. “By Grace Are Ye Saved,” a Christmas sermon published in 1966 in *Dialogue*, the new independent journal of Mormon thought for which he was an advisory editor, is a confession of his own neglect of the central Gospel principle of grace and a moving call to all us works-oriented Mormons to see and include that central principle of our faith. His review of David Brewer’s essay, “The Mormons,” in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, provides a stirring defense of the Church against stereotypes, including scholarly ones. His address, “The Place of the Liberal in Religion,” at the Salt Lake Institute in 1969, is a courageous explication and defense of the orthodoxy and value of liberal thought in Mormonism, at a time when liberalism was under severe attack at all levels of the Church. “The Church and the Larger Society,” written in 1969 for *The Carpenter*, an independent Mormon periodical published at the University of Wisconsin, is a powerful challenge to readers to join Bennion in his commitment to social morality as the center of religious faith. “The Things That Matter Most,” a lecture given at the invitation of the Boston Stake for their “Education Week” in 1977, is a beautifully personal and moving testimony of Bennion’s coherent philosophy of life. And his address to the Washington Sunstone Symposium in June 1987, “What It Means To Be a Christian” (published in the July 1987 issue of SUNSTONE), gives his mature estimate of the essentials of the Christian life.

Bennion speaks with the highest authority about the Christian life because of the way he passionately but unostentatiously lives it. In 1972, as he puts it, he “left the halls of ivy for the real world.” At age 64, near retirement from the U and so valued he could have stayed on there awhile, he served on a selection committee for a new executive director of the Community Services Council and accepted a draft to take the position himself. This private service agency, funded by United Way, had been mainly engaged in studying service needs and resources in the Salt Lake Valley. Bennion led the Council into direct service, which now includes a Food Bank that collects contributions (often through Bennion himself in his truck) and stocks centers providing food for thousands of needy households; coordinates hundreds of volunteers doing chore services (painting and fixing up houses again as in the Institute days, providing mail service and meals, etc.) for the elderly and handicapped; an Independent Living Center for paraplegics; a program to provide indigent senior citizens with dentures and eyeglasses at greatly reduced cost; Functional Fashions to make manageable clothing for the handicapped, etc. As Bennion says, with admitted oversimplification, “I used to teach religion; now I practice it.”

During these sixteen years of full-time community service,

extending far past normal retirement, as Bennion is now past eighty, he has also continued to serve his Church faithfully and quietly—remaining on the Correlation Committee until 1972, serving on various high councils, becoming a Bishop in 1979. Many have wondered why he was not called to be a General Authority. It seems to me that the Lord simply had other things for him to do, and he did them.

The honors have come from outside the official Church and, to Lowell's obvious embarrassment, have begun to crescendo in the 1980s: Phi Kappa Phi Honorary Address at BYU, 1973. The invited address at the Boston Stake, 1977. The 1981 Distinguished Service to Humanity Award from the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychologists. An honorary degree from the University of Utah, 1982. Extremely laudatory articles about him in the *Deseret News* (1984), *SUNSTONE* (1985) and *Utah's Peace News* (1987). The Good Samaritan Award from Utahns Against Hunger (1985). An evening for Lowell Bennion, in October 1986, where he was lauded by a poet and former student, Emma Lou Thayne; a colleague at Community Services, Elaine Smart; a scholar and friend, Sterling McMurrin; and a General Authority and co-teacher, Marion D. Hanks. (He also received a station wagon to replace his current battered truck.) Election to Utah's honorary society, the Beehive Hall of Fame (1987). And recipient of the Richard D. Bass award for Distinguished Service by a Utahn in the Humanities (April 1988). Charles Johnson, executive director of United Way, expressed well what the honors are for: "He's a combination of an Old Testament prophet, who wants to give you his vision of what should be, and new Testament good Samaritan, who doesn't stand back and talk, but steps in to do the good work himself."

The vision Bennion has provided in his teaching and writing is rich in variety and implication but coherent, focused on a few basics: Humans should engage in religious thought and living because otherwise their universal needs for meaning, for creative engagement in causes greater than themselves and extending beyond life, for unconditional love and strength to repent and change their lives, will not be met. He often quotes Goethe: "Life, divided by reason, leaves a remainder"; and William Montague: "Religion is the faith that the things that matter most are not ultimately at the mercy of the things that matter least." He loves the free, open, creative spirit of the restored gospel, especially Joseph Smith's unique contribution to Christian thought, the idea that all humans have eternal, God-like being in themselves, were not created from nothing and cannot be reduced to nothing, and thus that their very natures require and yearn for expansion, love, meaning beyond the earthly and material, in fact, for eternal progression. He sees the gospel, not as prohibition and restriction, not as doggedly earning rewards (or being subjected either to irresistible grace or predestined damnation) from an inscrutable Deity, but as a call to respond freely and rationally to the grace and knowledge given by Divine parents that enable us to fulfill our own natures as their literal children. "The truly religious person," he writes, "learns to thrill in the satisfaction that comes from freely

living in harmony with God's laws." But Bennion is also a stern realist, knowing that faith brings inner and eternal satisfactions but not relief from this world's evil and pain and that loving service will not solve all problems or produce utopias: He quotes the Hindu scripture, "To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits."

Bennion has experienced and studied a great range of human life in detail and teaches practical guides: "Do not marry anyone with whom you have not worked on a committee" "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 council of Deity." "Try a 'work party' sometime, where you have [groups of young people] helping the widows of the ward—serving with their hands, then coming together afterward for an old-fashioned supper, for singing, for prayer." "We should never hold a meeting, teach a class, or plan an activity without asking ourselves: How is this going to affect the people who will participate in the realization of their full potential as children of God?" Along with the practical advice, he is capable of creating memorable phrases: "In the realm of knowledge, one conforms to what is; in the realm of faith, one creates life after the image carried in the heart." "A Christian believes in plain and simple living and high thinking." Brother B. even indulged himself once in a set of poetic lines which provide a concise version of his philosophy of life:

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 of doing your job as well as it can be done.
 Learn to like the songs 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.

Bennion's greatest and most lasting intellectual contributions, I believe, are (1) his insistence on rational coherence in theology and his own success in achieving that coherence and (2), his use of that coherent, rational approach to give the most understandable and personally affecting explanation of the Atonement, the way in which Christ saves us from mortality, ignorance, and sin, that we yet have in Mormon theology. Our theology has tended to be quite rough and ready-made, developed piecemeal in response to continuous revelation in complex and changing historical conditions. Bennion's writing has been a major factor in giving it both elegant intellectual shape and powerful moral force. He shows that its diverse teachings, which seem heretical to tradi-

tional Christian thought and elicit mockery from some non-Mormon thinkers and baldly inconsistent beliefs from some Mormon extremists, nevertheless have great rational consistency. Those diverse ideas, united into a systematic theology, lead directly from a marvelous affirmation of the eternal God-like nature of all humans and culminate in the call to respond to Christ's uniquely saving power and to serve him in the world in ways that fulfill our own and others' needs and nature.

Bennion's teachings are founded in the scriptures. I noticed as a student that his Standard Works were not marked up like most other teachers' (probably because of his aversion to proof-texting and to pulverizing the gospel into disconnected, dogmatic fragments), but they were worn, throughout, to frazzled edges. He *knows* them well, all of them. It was through a more careful study than others had made of the Book of Mormon teachings on the Atonement, particularly Alma 34, that he made his key discovery about how Christ's suffering and death can save us, *not* by paying for our sins *after* we had repented, but by providing us incentive and power to repent *while we are still sinners*. As Amulek says, the Atonement "bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15). That simple change in emphasis, first articulated by Bennion in his *Religion of the Latter-Day Saints*, has, I know from much personal experience, released many Mormons from the burden of guilt they had carried because they had focused on *paying* and *justice* rather than on receiving Christ's mercy, his free gift. They have learned to look with assurance to Christ for *strength* to repent.

With all his love for the scriptures, Bennion has taken a helpfully rational approach to them—and to all other authority, again insisting on consistency, especially on harmony with Christ's teachings, and on individual responsibility: "I do not accept any interpretation of scripture that denies the impartiality or love of God or the free agency and brotherhood of man." *His Religion and the Pursuit of Truth* (1959) and *Understanding the Scriptures* (1981) remain the two best works on epistemology in Mormon thought; they provide a comprehensive analysis of how we can most effectively go about answering the most fundamental and difficult question we face: How do we know something is true, worthy of our commitment?

Finally, of course, Bennion rightly sees his greatest contribution in his ongoing attempt to live the Mormon religion rather than in his teaching and writing. His great achievement is really not in his writings but in his life. However, the two aspects of theory and practice, of word and action, as he well knows, are inseparable. In one of his first published essays, "Teaching Religion by Word of Mouth," he recognizes the great value of learning religion through experience and example but then explores the value of a 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 singles out tragedy, builds a plot around it, holds our attention to it until we feel it more intensely than life itself." He goes on to offer Jesus, "the artist in parable," as the great example, an example he explores in detail in *Jesus the Master Teacher* (1980). Bennion himself is such an artist, constructing parables from his own and others' experience

and using the scriptures with great power. His power in writing, like that of his example, derives less from its literary beauty than from the moral authority of his life and the felt presence of that life in his teachings.

I offer as a first-rate example the very short essay, "The Weightier Matters" (1978), published in the January 1978 SUNSTONE. I recommend you to turn to it as the best introduction to the values of Bennion's life and writing—and one of the very best essays written in our time. It succinctly expresses Brother Bennion's central imperative to his fellow human beings, based on his long study of the Hebrew prophets, Christ's teachings, and the Book of Mormon: that the God of love who is our divine parent wants most from us that we love and serve his other children, all of them but especially those in need. Without using any sophisticated devices or appealing directly to his personal experience, he simply tells some stories, from the Bible and from lives of people he knows in the Salt Lake Valley, and suggests we compare the modern stories with the scriptural ones and accept the consequences for our own action. We know, because we know his life, which he has neither advertised nor hidden under a bushel, that he speaks from the enormous authority of his own personal involvement in the lives he describes and his own obedience to the scriptural imperatives. I suggest you then get a copy of *An Introduction to the Gospel* and read the chapters on the mission of Christ, then browse as you will from the following bibliography. Wherever you start you will find the same unique voice and basic ideas and will be led into a uniquely challenging but satisfying vision of the religious and moral life.

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