

'The Most Important Thing in the World Is People'

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Lowell Bennion (1908–1995) — teacher, author, philosopher — was revered as a living legend by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unlike the conservative LDS leadership, Mr. Bennion encouraged youth to develop a multifaceted philosophy composed of self, everyday experiences, the arts, science, philosophy, reason and religion. “To leave any one approach entirely untapped is to go through life with limited vision,” he often said.

Bennion rose above the LDS position on issues of birth control, abortion, gender and race discrimination by taking the responsibility “from the church to the individual member.” Instead of blindly supporting church authority, Bennion weighed his beliefs and actions based on people. “I do believe the most important thing in the world is people, and we need to think of the things we do in the terms of people,” he said.

Bennion was sent to Germany on a mission for his church just prior to the outbreak of World War II. There he studied the writings of Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer. They offered Bennion a profound yet practical philosophy of life that was based on service for others.

When Bennion returned home at 26, he was appointed the first director of the LDS Institute of Religion adjacent to the University of Utah. He focused on “centering religious instruction in the life experiences of the students.” However, church leadership questioned Bennion’s teaching methods.

Unswayed, Bennion continued representing the needs of people. In 1945, he wrote to David O. McKay, then the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, stating that he was having trouble defending the church’s stance denying blacks official positions in the church. Twenty-three years later, Bennion was still writing about the injustice of the church’s stance regarding blacks, calling it “the most critical issue facing the Mormon church today.” He wrote: “Withholding the priesthood from the Negro is not a doctrine of the church; it is church practice.... No new revelation is needed to change doctrine; there need only be a change of practice.”

On June 7, 1978, 34 years after Bennion’s first official letter, the ban on blacks was lifted.

Lowell continued writing throughout his life, authoring 20 books and dozens of articles. However, in 1983 Lowell learned that his writings had been banned from official church publications because his ideas contradicted the official position of the church.

In 1962, Lowell became assistant dean of students at the University of Utah. In 1987, the university honored him by establishing the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center, which has 64 student-directed service projects.

Once a youth confided in Lowell that he was scared of the devil. Lowell responded, “Tell the devil to go to hell.” This reflected Bennion’s lifelong philosophy of “searching for the God within” and taking responsibility for your own thoughts, beliefs and actions.

Bennion once said: “Happiness does not come from without. We get pleasure from a good show or a party or a ball game, but real happiness comes from what is inside us, out of our thoughts and values. The basic human values are love and integrity. If you have these two values, you have all the ethical virtues of life.”

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