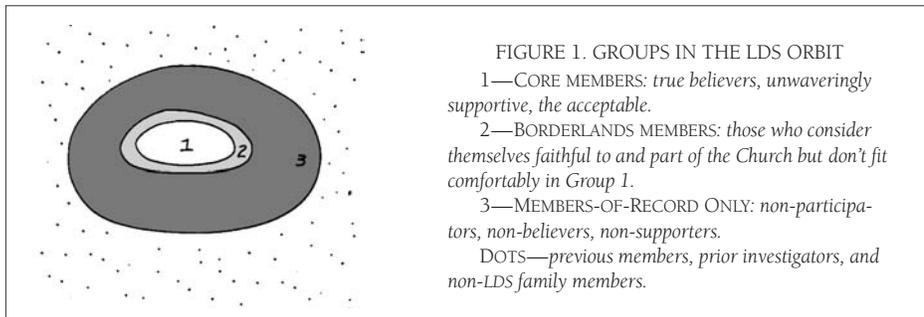


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

MORE TALES FROM
THE BORDERLANDS

By D. Jeff Burton



THIS REGULAR COLUMN explores the stories of Borderlanders because it is useful to know how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges.¹

In this column, I share correspondence with two self-identified Borderlanders and one core member.

The following is excerpted from an email exchange I had with Kevin (not his real name) over several weeks.

KEVIN: Thank you so much for your columns about “Borderland” Mormons. I have a couple of questions. First, does your Borderland Mormon idea assume that this person no longer gives or participates in blessings?

JEFF: By definition, a Borderland member is trying to fit in the best he or she knows how. If he or she is worthy to participate in the giving or getting of blessings, all the better.

KEVIN: What about temple recommends, callings, etc.?

JEFF: Same answer. I currently hold a temple recommend, and I have been called as a Church service missionary. Yet I consider myself fully in the Borderlands. In my view, Borderlanders can participate in almost every activity and receive every calling if they are faithful, supportive, and try to live Christian principles. I'm really enjoying my service mission and have been impressed by the

competence and dedication of the employees I work with at the Church Office Building in downtown Salt Lake City.

KEVIN: What advice can you give to a person who basically lives the lifestyle but whose beliefs do not include Jesus Christ? Is that even possible?

JEFF: The concepts and meanings related to Jesus Christ are numerous and broad. Are you questioning Christ as the Son of God? As the literal Savior of mankind? As a resurrected being? As a teacher of life-enhancing precepts and behavior?

I've never met a person who disbelieves every possible claim about Jesus Christ. Some Borderlanders (like me) don't have all the answers about him, but most accept him at least as a divine “teacher” or “savior” even if they redefine that for themselves as “saving me from unhappiness when I follow his prescriptions for living,” or something like that. And not having a sure belief in some specific aspect of Christ is not the same as disbelieving. We can simply “not know.” That is where faith comes in.

KEVIN (*writing about a week later*): Last Sunday, I had a PPI with my bishop in which I told him of my feelings and that as much as I wanted to truly believe everything, I didn't. I told him I would still try to read and study, but right now, I do not have a “testimony.” He was actually very understanding, and it was good therapy to finally tell someone other than my wife. I was released from my calling as ward mission leader, and I feel relieved to

be free of the burden of a calling in which I have to act like I believe in something that I really don't.

JEFF: It is fortunate that you have a good relationship with your fine bishop. Most (but not all) bishops are that understanding. You should keep your communication with him open and friendly.

KEVIN: You mentioned having a temple recommend. Is your bishop okay with you not having a “testimony” of some of the specific points they interview you on? I thought those were pretty black and white—either you believe or you don't, and if you don't, then you can't have a recommend. I would also think that those “in the know” about how you feel would give you funny looks or try to stop you if you tried to stand in on a blessing or fulfill a calling in which the priesthood is invoked.

JEFF: As I mentioned in an earlier column, my wonderful bishop and I explored this issue in a letter I sent to the First Presidency. He received a call from President Packer plus a letter from the First Presidency's office that said, “You may assure Brother Burton that faithful members like him are acceptable to the Church.” So it is faithfulness and behavior that are probably more important than having a testimony (if those are our only two choices).

KEVIN: One thing I find interesting is the big difference my wife and I see in the gospel with regard to its rigidity. I grant that, as you say, people have a rainbow of beliefs about the gospel. But in my life in the church, it has always seemed that no matter what your personal belief, it is “their way or the highway.” There is “a right and a wrong” way, and the line is abundantly clear. My wife, surprisingly, has a different opinion. She thinks that there is a lot of room for personal belief. I guess in the overall view, I agree with her (otherwise, I wouldn't stay on this journey). But I think that there is a strong orthodoxy in the Church that controls everything and smashes dissent.

JEFF: Your views on the seeming intolerance for dissent and diversity will most likely soften as time goes by. Right now it could be that you're feeling some anger which is causing you to read a few cases of extreme rigidity as the norm and blocking your view of the diversity among members' and leaders' views that really is present.

KEVIN: What does the Borderlands approach say about tithing and the Word of Wisdom? Have you met people who are Borderlanders, have temple recommends and callings, but who don't follow the “rules?” I don't have an urge to go out and

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.

drink alcohol or start smoking, but I do wonder about how Borderlanders who want a cup of coffee or don't pay a full tithe can get a temple recommend.

JEFF: If someone intends to continue as a "faithful" Mormon and remain active plus be a temple recommend holder, he or she must expect to follow the well-defined "rules" (e.g., tithing and the Word of Wisdom). Word of Wisdom and tithing rules are more specific and measurable than the more diffuse "testimony" and faithfulness issues. And there is the importance of honesty, which I introduced in the March 2005 column. Honesty impacts us here because: (1) if people can't be honest with themselves, they cannot have honest relationships with others, (2) honesty is enmeshed within the whole framework of LDS and Christian values and can't be ignored, (3) we in the Borderlands have a natural mandate to exemplify honesty, and (4) being honest with ourselves and others helps us to come to terms with the reality of our experiences and our lives and, in the end, is healing all around.

KEVIN: I am not trying to pry, but I feel as though I have kindred spirits when I can read or hear others' stories of how they turned from "orthodox Mormon" to skeptic. Is *your* story published anywhere?

JEFF: I have others' stories ready to share in the Borderlands column, and I hope many more will share their stories with me, but the term "orthodox Mormon" has never fit me. However, I did share my own story in the December 2003 SUNSTONE. And I also share it in my book, *For Those Who Wonder*, which is available in a free download for those who email me a request.²

I received the following interesting and useful comments from someone who reads this column yet considers himself a "core member" instead of a Borderlander.

I want to share some thoughts I've had about your November article in SUNSTONE, "Developing an LDS-Compatible Personal Religion." I sense your sincere desire to offer hope to those who struggle with doubts, questions and distance from full activity in the Church. I realize I could be out of line with the following comments since I'm not as close to the challenge these people have as you are. But I'm sending them to you anyway to give you another perspective from a member of the church who considers himself to be part of the group you call "core members."

In the sidebar to that article, you suggest, among other things, that those living an

LDS-compatible personal religion "seek to change Church programs that [they] believe can be more beneficial." To me, a personal religion that would be more compatible with the "official Church model" would be one that seeks to find harmony, understanding of, and compliance with "the program" until a spiritual confirmation or affirmation can be obtained. I believe this will require some trust and faith in God and Church authority from the beginning.

I like the section about motivations—how one man had created misunderstandings in his own mind (made assumptions) about how God felt about him, that God was "displeased" with him. I understand this because I have done similar things, as have countless others I know of. This is part of the learning and growing we all do in this life, don't you think? I believe the truth is, if we trust the decisions of God—that they are ultimately in our best interest, and not about our qualifications—we will be better off in the long (eternal) run. And if we would do this, we probably would have no problems with depression, because we would realize just how truly pleased God is with us, even with all our imperfections, no matter what calling we have in the Church, and no matter what we think we need to be.

You suggested Borderlanders might "eventually move away from guilt and fear" as a motivator. To me, moving *through* guilt and fear (as well as mistrust), no matter how "unfounded" such may be, would be more effective in eventually completely removing obstacles that are in the way of the more satisfying motivations.

The following is excerpted from a handwritten letter from another reader whose prose style reminds me a bit of Joseph Smith's.

Your article in the March 2005 issue proffered the thesis that there are quite possibly many more "Borderland" members of the Church than anyone wants to admit. This evoked deep and serious reflections, even profound contemplations, as to whether or not I consider myself a "Borderlander."

I have come to the fortuitous and serene conclusion that I am, in point of fact, a "Borderlander." This expatriation to the Borderlands has come about, not so much as a result of any conscious free will, but rather has been involuntarily imposed upon me [by various outside forces]. Notwithstanding, for my part, this imposition is gladly embraced with no shame, no regret, no consternation, and no disquietude.

The Gospels are replete with the most

profound and penetrating testaments of how good and gratifying it is for all members of the church to dwell together in unity, striving together for the *faith* of the gospel of Christ (Psalms 133:1; Philippians 1:27).

With regards to the premise that there are, in reality, many members of the Church who would be properly categorized as "Borderlander," I offer the following reflections:

First, I find no sin, transgression, vice, or shame in being categorized as a "Borderlander." However, there are, I fear, far too many worthy and righteous members who would, and do, debase this group. Man was divinely and inherently created to question, to probe, to investigate, to scrutinize, to study, to query, and to examine thoroughly. This quest, which appears to be a fundamental credo of a "Borderlander" and "Sunstoner" is authoritatively addressed in holy script: John 16:13; Moroni 10:5; John 8:32; D&C 93:36; Proverbs 15:14; Matthew 7:7–8; and others.

Second. My association with other Borderlanders, vicariously experienced through your column, has bestowed upon me a keen sense and acute appreciation for the abundant, abiding, and sincere manifestation of *charity*, which seems prevalent in, and consistent with, a Borderlander's disposition and immutable soul. 🙏

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is No. 20), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure. Copies of former columns are available on the Sunstone website, www.sunstoneonline.com.

2. See D. Jeff Burton, "Personal Experiences in the Borderlands," SUNSTONE, December 2003, 67–69. To receive a free download of the latest version of *For Those Who Wonder*, please email me at: jeff@eburton.com.



Please send me any of your experiences or tales from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton
2974 So. Oakwood Dr.
Bountiful, Utah 84010
jeff@eburton.com