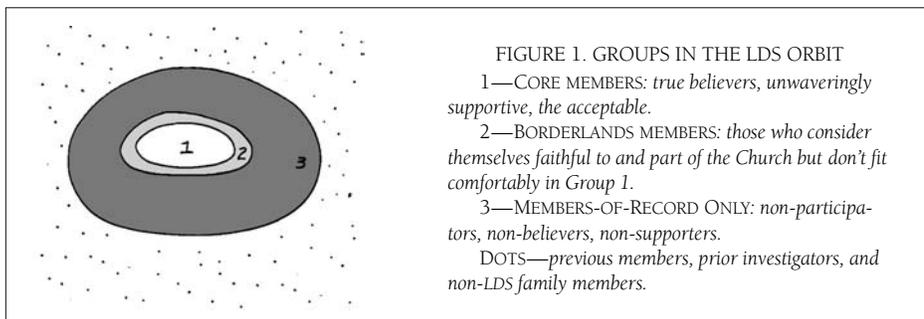


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

COPING WITH A
DEADLY PANDEMIC

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 several Borderlanders and offer my own take on a current “pandemic” among Latter-day Saints in this information age.

TARGET AUDIENCE

I WAS RECENTLY asked, “Who would you like to read your column? ‘Borderlanders’ seems like a broad term that might include almost everyone.”

My main focus is to try to help those who need or would like to stay peacefully involved with the Church. There are Borderlanders, for example, who though struggling with their faith and feelings of acceptability, work at BYU, the Church Office Building, or at Deseret Industries and who therefore “can’t afford” not to be active and involved. Others have had a strong connection to Mormonism via family, spouse, parents, or children and need to maintain those relationships. Still others have found that the Church and the gospel have provided answers to important life questions in the past and don’t want to leave that familiar source of inspiration and assistance, yet don’t really know where to turn when help with doubts is needed. Some are natural skeptics, who always question authority and have faith in the

scientific method but want to continue as faithful Mormons. Finally, others may simply like being “participating students of Mormonism” and want to be acceptable.

“I HAVE BELIEVED ALL MY LIFE”

BUD IS A reader of the “Braving the Borderlands” column and is willing to share his story with us. (Bud is not his real name, and his story has been edited to protect his identity and modified to fit into this space.) He represents the type of person for whom this column is written. Bud’s story also illustrates the current “pandemic” I will discuss in what follows.

I was raised in the Church, am active, served a mission, married in the temple, helped my children go on missions, have served in high positions. In all these years, I have never had cause to disbelieve any claims related to the LDS religion. I have read the Book of Mormon in several languages and always believed it was true and accurate. As a missionary, I believed and taught that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God.

A year ago, I had the opportunity to purchase an authentic Kirtland Bank Note. It was signed by Joseph Smith in his own hand. To have and to feel the actual signature of God’s Prophet—what a trea-

sure! My curiosity about the bank note and how it was produced caused me to do some research about the bank in Kirtland. I had read about it in Church history, but it had been mentioned in passing as some trivial event.

This is how my interest in early Church history was sparked, and it has led me on a scary path to where I now have many questions about who Joseph Smith really was and if he was a true prophet of God as he claimed. I was surprised to find a lot of information that was not in the authorized Church history books.

Honestly, as I read and studied further, I was shocked and began to feel as if I had just been told (at age 58) by my mother that I was an illegitimate child. It has been terribly disturbing to me to discover aspects of Joseph Smith that are completely absent from the official history lessons we are taught in Church settings.

My daughter is on a mission at this time, and what is happening to me makes for a very difficult situation with her and my wife.

COPING WITH A DEADLY PANDEMIC

LIFE routinely exposes us to difficult situations and sometimes threatens our health and well-being. Take the widely anticipated bird flu. It is theorized that exposure to a human-transmittable form of the H4N1 virus may result in some very unhappy outcomes. Whether you or I will have an adverse reaction to this strain depends on three factors: virulence, dose, and susceptibility. Virulence relates to the relative infectiousness of the virus and its ability to overcome the body’s natural defenses. Dose concerns concentration and duration of exposure. Susceptibility describes a person’s body’s ability to defend itself, or a person’s immunity to the virus. One can escape the ravages of the flu by (1) avoiding exposure, or (2) being vaccinated (or exposed to a weakened virus) to enhance immunity and reduce susceptibility.

How does this relate to Latter-day Saints who find themselves in the Borderlands? As Bud found out, there are troubling historical facts and other issues that can threaten our emotional and religious lives when we’re “exposed” to them. As in the case of a potentially deadly virus, to avoid adverse effects, we can

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As in the case of a potentially deadly virus, to avoid adverse effects, we can either isolate ourselves from the exposure source or be inoculated to increase our immunity.

(1) isolate ourselves from the exposure source or (2) be vaccinated or inoculated to increase our immunity.

Most active members (and historically, the Church itself) have routinely chosen approach (1)—avoidance. I have often heard the following statement made in reference to non-Church-approved historical writings: “I just don’t want to read any of it. I don’t want to know what happened.” This approach works reasonably well for three distinct groups of members: (1) the non-curious, (2) those without access to “non-approved” information, and (3) those who have access but carefully avoid exposure to non-approved information sources.

As we all know, the reach of the Internet threatens to effectively eliminate the possibility of staying in groups (2) or (3). One simply cannot avoid exposure in this day of instant, wide, and home-accessible information. Church statistics suggest that 80 percent of baptized members become estranged from the Church sometime during their lifetime. This sounds like a pandemic to me.

Unfortunately, a person who avoids exposure to flu virus all his life and then picks up a big dose through someone else’s unprotected bad cough or sneeze is likely to become very sick. Likewise, despite rigorous efforts at avoiding exposure, members such as Bud who chance upon non-faith-promoting aspects of the Joseph Smith story often experience traumatic and dangerous reactions (such as leaving the church, becoming anti-Mormon, being depressed, giving up important things such as friends and family, abandoning Christian principles, or becoming dishonest closet doubters.)

If you’ve read this column regularly, you’ll know that I favor the inoculation approach. Avoidance (as the only preventative) is too difficult for most of us these days.

Some potentially important immunity boosters have begun to arrive on the scene. Up until now, most of what purports to be a “vaccine” in Mormon apologetic literature has been more like a sugary placebo and, in the worst cases, Charles Dickens’s “black liquid” quack remedy.

BOOSTING ONE’S IMMUNITY

Broadening our definition of truth. As Karen

Armstrong notes in her writings, religion can be “true” when it is effectual in changing lives for the better and making a person happier, more honest, more generous, and so forth. For me as a Borderlander, the official Joseph Smith story would be nice if it could be proven “factual,” but it is not critical to “truth” by Armstrong’s larger definition. When I say, “the Church is true,” I mean it primarily in this second sense.

Finding good vaccines. For the fledgling Borderlanders I’ve encountered, I’ve begun to tentatively prescribe Richard Bushman’s new book *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* as a potential vaccine.² I believe it might also act as a curative agent for those who have been exposed previously and are now suffering. The book provides plausible, credible, and positive explanations for many of the serious problems raised over the years about the Joseph Smith story.

The book has been described as the first balanced history of Joseph Smith,³ and yet it is one that is openly showcased at Deseret Book. One of my Bountiful ward high priests even quoted from it recently and met little resistance from Bountiful-brand “true believers”!

If you or someone you know and care about is likely to be exposed, or has already been infected by a pretty virulent testimony-killing virus, *Rough Stone Rolling* could be an effective vaccine (or curative) for those who wish to remain healthy or to get over a difficult problem more quickly and with less disruption in their lives.

Many have found my book, *For Those Who Wonder*, palliative.⁴ I recently received the following email from a reader:

Your book has literally saved me from spiritual death. You probably get told that quite often . . . by people who are searching. It has been four years with my closet crusade of yearning for answers to my questions. Your book has put names to my life processes that I have been going through. Who would have ever thought that I was going through a grieving stage? I think I am on the last step of this process, and it feels good to know someone understands me. Thank you!

A Gift of Peace

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Managing Religious Questions and Doubts



D. Jeff Burton

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IT would be ideal if the Church would prescribe the vaccines, and maybe someday it will. But for the moment, the inoculation must be obtained and delivered by us at the local level, generally best done by friends and family members. You and I can help those with low immunity.

As with all health issues, each of us in the Borderlands must also take responsibility for our own health. Let’s look seriously for the right vaccines and inoculations before we “get sick” and disrupt our lives or others’. ☺

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-first), 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 all past Borderlands columns are available at www.forthosewhowonder.com.

2. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

3. Mark D. Thomas, “Where Is Joseph Smith Now?” *SUNSTONE*, November 2005, 58–63.

4. To get a free copy of the book, simply log onto <http://www.forthosewhowonder.com>.

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

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