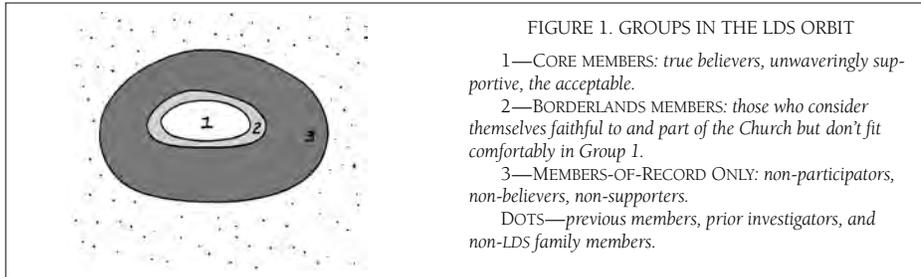


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

BITS AND PIECES
FROM THE INBOX

by D. Jeff Burton



THE PAST FEW Borderlands columns have elicited some particularly worthwhile comments, some of which I want to share with you. Of course I've changed the writers' names to shelter their identities.¹

*Email from Barbara responding to recent columns about those struggling to "find a suitable mate" or to manage relationship issues:*²

BARBARA: When my husband and I began our relationship, he was a true believer. I was a convert who, though holding strong reservations about organized religion, felt drawn to the Church by its new and intellectually stimulating ideas. Our differing perspectives have caused some heated and exciting debates that started during our dating years and have continued on through our marriage to date. But our differing outlooks have been a blessing instead of a stumbling block. Several things help us navigate these turbulent waters.

- Richard Poll's talk about Liahona Saints and Iron Rod Saints helped us to agree that both approaches have a place in the search for truth, and both should be respected.

- We try not to let our egos and pride get in the way. We don't try to prove the other person wrong. We respect each other's integrity.

- We recognize that one person's gifts, spiritual and otherwise, are different from an-

other's. We acknowledge that each has strengths that can help us in our relationship.

- Being trained in the sciences, we try to use the scientific method in our search for truth. For example, we observe how others practice a principle in order to ascertain how effective it is. If the principle works well in most cases, we usually feel good about adopting it also.

- When we pray and get answers, we recognize that the answer is for the one asking and perhaps not for someone else. We allow the other the liberty of asking and receiving answers that make sense for him or her.

- We recognize that the joy of life is the journey and that journeys are better with a companion. Life would be very boring if we all thought exactly alike.

Email from Darius:

DARIUS: Thanks to you all for SUNSTONE magazine. I often read it cover to cover when it arrives. It gives me an alternate, more in-depth version of Mormonism than I get through traditional Church channels. I wonder how many other versions of Mormonism I could conjure up if I put my mind to it? Perhaps you have already done it with your Borderlands diagram: at least four of them.

Are any of your writers or editors concerned about the possibility of being "called on the carpet" by Church leaders for stepping too far out of the mainstream? Do you follow any guidelines in this respect?

JEFF: Glad you like the magazine. I think you're right about there being "many other versions" of Mormonism out there. Some may think we're in lock-step, but my guess is that out of any two million active Mormons, you would find about two million slightly or significantly different versions of Mormonism. Think about your own ward members or even your family. Each has a differing view of Mormonism and what it requires of them.

In this column and my books, I've suggested that each of us naturally develops a personal relationship with our Father in Heaven—and a personal religion. For most of us in the Borderlands, our personal religion is based on the fundamentals of Christianity and Mormonism. It's in our DNA, as they say.

As for following guidelines, yes, we at SUNSTONE follow some informal guidelines, e.g. responsible scholarship, honesty, and no attacks on Church leaders, doctrine, or scripture. What you see in SUNSTONE are thoughts about Mormon experience, policy, and practice, especially as they affect the local scene—the people in the wards and stakes—as my column does.

I haven't sensed much worry about "being called on the carpet." Church leaders likely have more important concerns.

I've had no direct responses from the official Church to my Borderland columns. But over the years, two of my stake presidents have called me in to ask about things I have written. Though I was under the impression that the call-ins were of local origin, both stake presidents stated that someone had called them from "downtown" to look into things. In the first incident, I was released from the stake high council. In the most recent case, the stake president just seemed to be ascertaining my support of the Church—kind of like a temple recommend interview. I left the meeting in good stead, I think. I have since served a mission. I do my home teaching every month and serve as our ward's neighborhood emergency preparation coordinator. But, I am considered (by myself and by ward members) to be on the fringes or in the borderlands of the Church. This status makes it harder for me to be close to other ward members, but I've seen that even true

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

believers can have that same difficulty. We may see our fellow ward members on Sunday for three hours and get to know them through our callings, but we rarely know what's really going on "behind the front door" of most homes, or behind the foreheads of most ward members.

Email from Travis who, with his wife, agonized for years over their relationship with the Church and their status as Borderlanders. His experience of moving into Group 3 status picks up here. This may be instructive for those contemplating leaving the Borderlands:

TRAVIS: We'd leave the ward parking lot each Sunday, and either my wife or I would ask, "Why do we come? We don't belong here anymore."

For a long time, we pondered the best way of dropping out, but nothing seemed feasible. The problem was solved when I became ill and couldn't go to church for several months. When I did go back, I found I hadn't missed it a bit; I haven't been back regularly since then. That was two years ago. My wife still serves as a family history consultant and works one day each week in the Family History Center. Otherwise, we're not really active anymore.

Our relationship with our children has not been affected much. Their love for us doesn't seem dependent on our level of activity in the Church. Our son long ago moved to Group 3, and our youngest daughter is a frequent flyer between Groups 2 and 3. Our oldest daughter married a returned missionary who later became a bishop. She's an ex-Relief Society president who teaches seminary. She'll live happily ever after in Group 1. Our decision to leave activity hurt her, but she expresses her love and affection as freely as she did as a child.

Though most members of the ward have essentially shunned us, our hometeacher has stuck close. He'd be here in a minute if we needed him. Shortly after we explained to him why we dropped our activity, the bishopric came over. When we explained our situation to them, they seemed to take it personally, becoming defensive, then argumentative. That visit was followed by one from stake folks, with a similar result.

We feel no regrets about our decision so far. In fact, we feel relieved. Towards the end, every time we went to church, we felt as if we were walking up the down escalator. That tension is now gone from our lives. The only downside to our decision is the difficulty of finding ways to make

Sunday spiritual and different from the other days. I'm a firm believer in keeping the Sabbath day holy.

What does my personal religion look like now? In his book, *On Being a Christian*, Catholic theologian Hans Kung wrote that he doesn't consider himself to be a good Christian; however, he considers it a good thing to be a Christian. I guess that's where I am now—trying to figure out what being a good Christian means for me.

Email from Tim responding to Dustin's story in column 37. While courting a girl, Dustin prayed and felt that God approved of their getting married. However, his girlfriend received the opposite answer. Dustin then expressed anger at God over the mix-up.²

TIM: We knew a young convert very well and took him into our home for a while. Our bishop eventually called him on a mission and then encouraged him to go to BYU. There he met a pretty girl who had grown up a standard Mormon. They prayed for guidance, became engaged, and set a date.

Since he had no family in the Church, our young man asked us to accompany him to the temple wedding. We traveled a few hundred miles to get there, but after our arrival, we noticed some strange actions that suggested trouble. That night at midnight, he knocked on our motel door and said he didn't think the marriage was going to happen, and sure enough, it didn't.

He was brokenhearted, of course. She was confused about God's will for her and shortly thereafter went on a mission, telling people that that was what God had in mind for her all along. He continued at BYU and eventually met and married a talented, self-assured, competent girl with a beautiful spirit. She was just right for him and still is. So things worked out for him, despite what he thought God might have wanted for him earlier.

Nothing can guarantee that what we might think or assume is God's will is absolute and unchanging. Our human nature might be clouding the picture or warping our perceptions. Or maybe God is okay with several solutions to a problem.

Email from Ron:

RON: Though I miss some of the perks of being in Group 1, I count myself mostly in the Borderlands. I can't go back without changes—in me or in the Church. What do you think would make it easier for me to

move back into Group 1 status?

JEFF: That is a complex and very personal question. It would certainly make things easier if Group 1 members accepted Borderlanders as they are. And I agree that by making certain policy and practice changes, the Church could expand the borders to perhaps include many of us. I once compiled a list of "inspirations" that, if I were God, I would broadcast to Mormons at local levels in hopes of preparing a few changes in policy and practice. Here's a sample of my wish list of "inspirations." (Add a dash of MSG to these, please.)

- Living a life based on Christian principles is at least as important as going to church meetings or to the temple. A religious life based on faith is as valuable as one based on testimony.

- Instead of Cheerios, mothers may issue Mrs. Cavanaugh's chocolates to their children (and also to those sitting nearby).

- It is okay to expand temple covenants to include more Jesus-like behaviors such as love, kindness, patience, thoughtfulness, sharing, caring, humility and honesty.

- It is also acceptable to open temple marriage ceremonies to immediate family members, whether they hold temple recommends or not.

- Let's minimize secrets. Secrets worth keeping are mainly those that protect the personal privacy of individual members.

- Based on the inspiration above, it is okay to provide more information to members about, for example, how tithing money is spent or activity statistics.

- Likewise, Church business meetings can be open to members, and the minutes of such meetings may be made widely available.

- Explanations of how policy decisions come about—who was involved, why the issue arose, and how the discussion proceeded—may be shared with members. It is acceptable to glean information and ideas from members before policy decisions are rendered.

- It would be useful if ward and stake members had a hand in selecting their local leaders.

- In some cases, it is fine to de-emphasize proselytizing missions and instead encourage youth to go on service-oriented missions.

- Let's try allowing members to partially designate the destination of their tithing donations, e.g., "50% to mission work."

- Church magazine articles for adults can offer competing viewpoints on an issue without causing disastrous consequences.

- Non-members who are expert in some religious topic can be invited to speak at Church meetings.

- When appropriate, the bishop is allowed to stand up and announce, "It's such a nice day; let's cancel the meeting and have a ward picnic instead."

- On some Sundays, it is okay for the bishop and high councilmen to sit with their children in the audience while their wives sit on the stand.

- It won't hurt if teachers are free to use any factual source of information that sheds

light on topics covered in classes.

RON: Okay, I see what you mean. One more thought: It isn't only God who inspires people; people themselves sometimes inspire other people. But moving on, for your first "inspiration," what "Christian principles" are you talking about?

JEFF: I'm referring to the principles that guide the way we treat others. Once, for a home teaching lesson, I compiled a list of words that reflect "Christian traits and approaches for living." For me, these terms represent the attitudes and behaviors that mark one as a Mormon Christian. They suggest attributes that I associate with my understanding of Jesus. I try (with limited success, frankly) to choose one of these traits or attitudes each day, figure out what it means, and apply it that day to my behavior. For example, if the day's word is "caring," I might think as I drive my car, "How can I care for people in the other cars on the road?" I might conclude, "I won't use my cell phone, I'll avoid competing with other drivers, and I'll drive carefully."

You might think of this approach as

the "Borderlands Game." You might also compile a personal list for yourself and try this game. Then have your kids try the game.

Below is my list.

NOTES

1. In our model, we have defined a "Borderland" member (Group 2) as "a Church member who maintains ties to the Church but who may have a different understanding of faith and belief, lack of a standard LDS 'testimony,' a different view of LDS history, open questions about some aspect of the Church, reduced or modified Church activity, feelings of not meeting traditional Group 1 norms or acceptability criteria."

2. Copies of past columns are available for free download at www.forthosewhowonder.com.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

*D. Jeff Burton,
djeffburt@gmail.com*

