

BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

EXPLORATIONS OF ACCEPTABILITY

By D. Jeff Burton

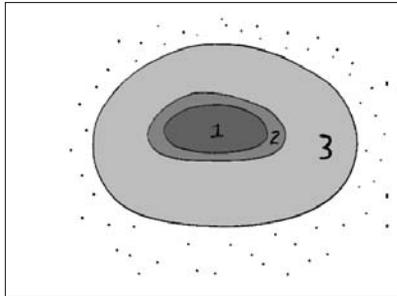


FIGURE 1. GROUPS IN THE LDS ORBIT
 1—CORE MEMBERS: true believers, unwaveringly supportive; the acceptable.
 2—BORDERLANDS MEMBERS: those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but don't fit comfortably in Group 1.
 3—MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY: non-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.
 DOTS—previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

In my first column, I introduced the concept of the “Borderland member” (SUNSTONE, Apr. 2002, also see Figure 1 above).¹ As I suggested there, statistics reveal that as many as 80 percent of those baptized worldwide either leave the Church, are excommunicated, or become constituents of Group 3 sometime during their lives. A small percentage sojourn in the Borderlands striving to keep their affiliations to the Church alive. It is to these folks that I dedicate this column.

MANY BORDERLANDERS WOULD like acceptance by Group 1 members, but they believe they don't meet certain “acceptability criteria” for “core member” status. (Although some Borderlanders might claim they care only if they are acceptable to God, it is human nature to want to be accepted by the group.) And, as Borderlanders can testify, many Group 1 members do not find Borderlanders to be acceptable or “real” Latter-day Saints either.

When exploring this issue of “acceptance,” we need first to grapple with some questions:²

- What are characteristics of an “acceptable” Latter-day Saint?
- What are the current boundaries of “acceptability”?
- What can be done to broaden them?
- Are we as Borderlanders doing our part to be acceptable?

- As Borderlanders who wish for greater acceptance, are we also willing to accept Group 1 Latter-day Saints as they are? To accept the Church as it is?

- How might the scriptures help us understand acceptance, tolerance, diversity, unity, oneness, inclusion?

- What have early Mormon leaders said about these notions? What are today's leaders saying?

- Do goals for greater inclusion and acceptance conflict with goals for promoting more “oneness” or “unity”?

THE following letter from Mary describes her husband's brush with feelings that he was somehow “unacceptable.” Names and certain details have been changed.

My husband John joined the church in 1975, while serving in the Army, and he soon fell in with a group of active LDS servicemen. His problems started when he got out of the military and attempted to enter LDS culture. He enrolled at Snow College because his LDS friends told him it was important for him to find a Mormon wife.

Once John arrived on campus, he quickly discovered that while LDS girls would date him, few considered him husband material because he was not a “returned

missionary.” He describes “date interviews” where girls would flirt and be interested until they got to the fateful question, “So where did you go on your mission?” When he told them that he had joined the Church while serving in the military, their eyes would seem to turn blank and he could see himself being crossed off their “potential husband” list.

In an attempt to fit in, John started spending a lot of time at the LDS Institute. He poked around, trying to find out how to get on the student group that planned activities for the students. He was told that those spots were reserved for students with “leadership” experience. When he told them he had been in many leadership positions during his years in the service, they looked at him blankly. “We're looking for guys who were DLs and ZIs on their missions.”

One night, he took a girl on a date to hear a member of the general Relief Society presidency give a talk. (His plan, he told me years later, was to be a “super-Mormon.” Let RM's take girls to movies and to watch submarine races. He would take girls to hear Church speakers and to ward activities.) He and his potential girlfriend sat holding hands in the front of the chapel. Well, the talk turned out to be about why LDS young women should marry only returned missionaries. By the end of the talk, his date had slid about three feet down the pew.

BEFORE continuing, let's briefly explore one of the questions listed above. (We will explore others in upcoming columns.) What can be done to broaden the bounds of acceptability?

Juanita Brooks described her rancher father's advice: The Church is like a huge herd of cattle being driven across the landscape. To jump out in front and try to turn the herd will result in being trampled. It is best to call to the lead cows from the sidelines. Hearing, they may turn, but usually only in small increments.

I believe this is still good advice and trust that we can cautiously, and in Christlike ways, influence both leaders and individual members of the herd. We can and should try to influence general Church policy because,

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like politics, Church programs are local in their implementation and impact. For example, if I believe my child needs more instruction on Christ’s teachings about honesty, and if I perceive that the correlated program does not emphasize honesty enough, I have every right—and the responsibility—to ask appropriate general leaders to include more instruction on honesty in Church lesson plans. The same approach works for almost any concern. If you feel the Church needs a policy of greater acceptance of diversity in order to foster tolerance and love at your local level, then by all means, speak up. Working through normal channels is recommended, but I know from personal experience over the years that our leaders read (and sometimes respond to) serious letters, written in private, concerning things that concern us.

Here are a few thoughts for enhancing acceptance at the local level:

- Stay involved in our wards and stakes. Little can be accomplished by outsiders. Concerned, faithful members can improve things at the local level. Organizing and participating exclusively in unofficial organizations and meetings can bring only temporary relief.

- Tell local leaders and ward members of our feelings and concerns. Speak out, as appropriate, but in polite, loving, and Christlike ways. Don’t hurt or embarrass anyone. If only one person in each ward stands up for increased tolerance and acceptance of diversity, and for the search for Joseph Smith’s “all true principles,” it will have a worldwide impact for good.

- Give our concerns time. Things will likely correct themselves because at all levels, the Church is led by well-meaning, inspiration-worthy leaders. It may take years, but eventually right will prevail. (Who knows, our ideas about what should be done could very well be wrong. Time is a good friend and teacher.)

- Work and pray to understand the issues and then share what we know with others, as warranted and appropriate.

Mary’s letter continues:

After that experience, John stopped going to church. He had

been in Utah for two years but then moved to California. Years later, in talking with him about this painful time in his life, I asked him why, if serving a mission seemed so important, he hadn’t gone to his bishop.

He looked at me blankly. “I couldn’t do that. You aren’t supposed to aspire to any Church calling. I might have done that if they had called me, but I was never ‘called’ to go on a mission. I assumed they didn’t think I was good enough because I never got called.”

I was stunned. “Don’t you realize that you have to fill out papers and have a series of interviews that all get bound up and sent to Salt Lake? You have to sort of make an application before you get a mission call!”

He sat right there and cried his eyes out. All those years he had thought there had been something unacceptable about him; that he somehow wasn’t good enough to serve a mission; that he was some sort of “second class citizen” in the Mormon community because he was a convert. People had gone on and on about how important a mission was and had made references to the inferiority of non-returned missionary men in his presence, but no one had ever suggested that he see the bishop about serving a mission himself.

When I met John, he was sporadically attending sacrament meeting, so few in his ward knew who he was, or seemed to care. This, of course, only reinforced his feelings of being an unacceptable outsider.

It was a long time before he felt totally comfortable attending all of the meetings. His work causes us to move every two or three years, and we still have a hard time when we find ourselves in a ward with a “critical mass” of Utah expatriates,

for so many seem to have a very difficult time telling the difference between Mormon culture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. We feel most comfortable in wards that are made up mostly of converts, like ourselves.

The “Borderlands” column touched me very deeply. I look forward to seeing these topics addressed in upcoming issues.

An unfortunate confluence of non-acceptance and John’s lack of understanding of unique LDS ways resulted in years of unwarranted turmoil, sadness, and feelings of alienation. And feelings of being “unacceptable” still continue for both Mary and John, although for another commonly heard reason. Mary’s letter has also shown us that “acceptability” is very often in the eye of the beholder, regardless of which group one is in.

THE coin of acceptability has two faces. On one side is the question, “What is acceptable?” On the other side, “Are we doing our part to be acceptable?” Those will be the questions for another column. 

NOTES

1. A “Borderlander” is one who may have, for example, an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith or belief, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about some aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria.

2. Why don’t you tackle one of these questions? Send me your thoughts at the address below. We can share your ideas and experiences as space and need allow.

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