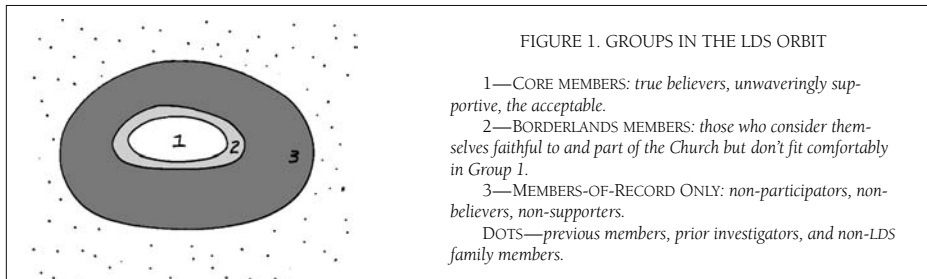


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

THE BORDERLANDER'S GIFT

By D. Jeff Burton



NOTE: 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 offer two stories that Borderlanders have shared with me. (I have modified details to protect identity.) I also briefly discuss a problem that has recently arisen in my church experience that may also come up for some Borderlanders.

First, however, thanks to those who blogged about the “Pandemic” column from the September 2006 SUNSTONE at www.SunstoneBlog.com. I greatly appreciate those who blog with a civil tone and recognize the great diversity of those in the Borderlands. I hope to see more of this approach to sharing good information among us.

Update from Borderlander “Jared”²

A FEW MONTHS ago, our daughter announced that she is going to BYU next year and is also determined to be married in the temple. My first thought when she dropped this bomb on us was, “Where did we go wrong?” Then one night she said, “Mom will never go to the temple with me.” I told her to not think it was impossible and said, “Stranger things have happened. Don't be too surprised.” I thought I was just giving her a straw to grasp. I never imagined it would actually happen.

Then that stranger thing did happen. We had driven our girls to a Church-sponsored “Trek.” We saw them depart and then met them at the end. We attended their testimony meeting, spoke with them, and watched them in action. When we got home, we reflected on what a great family experience the whole thing had been for us and for the girls.

The feeling of the Spirit was tangible at that Trek. It occurred to me to wonder if it had been some kind of “mass hysteria.” Then I thought, “So what if it was? It was good—logical or not. Everyone was the better for it.”

At that point, an epiphany occurred for my wife and me. We said, almost in unison, “We probably ought to jump in all the way and get temple recommends.” I forget the exact words, or who said it first, but it was a united feeling. It will be a good thing for all of us.

Since the time several years ago when we almost left the Church but then decided to give it one more chance, we have been getting more and more involved—volunteering, paying tithing, going on splits with the missionaries, getting out our old temple garments (I came within a whisker of burning them), and accepting little callings. The more we got involved, the more blessings came to us: health-wise (we found a needed medical program at the hospital), financially, and family-wise (our relationship, my relationship with our daughters).

It was as if someone was trying to tell us something. My wife and I often tell each other, “You are mine!” This new experience was sort of like God telling me, “This family is mine! You can come along and enjoy the fruits, or you can kick against the pricks and be dragged along kicking and screaming and be an obstacle!” I thought, “How dumb do I look?” As Bob Dylan sings, “It doesn't take a weatherman to tell which way the wind is blowing.”

We meditated and prayed and talked endlessly. But in the final analysis, we felt as if we were being pulled into a loving current that is all good. To hell with logic and past rationales and reasoning. There is good, and there is divinely good, which cannot be understood with the temporal mind. You can explain the process of creating and having a baby logically, naturally, biologically, but you miss the whole point and the bigger meaning and reality of it all. Who would ever want a baby if only logic were involved? Same sort of deal. Our decision is bigger than our egos and our reasoning. It feels “delicious” and so, so right.

So we went to our bishop for recommends, where, of course, I had to face the questions: “Do you believe. . . ? Do you accept. . . ? Do you have a testimony of. . . ? You wrote that one approach was to level with the bishop, to say essentially:

I do not want to be duplicitous about any of this, but I really do not know anything for sure. But I am a loyal and dedicated member of this church. I want to work for it and serve others, and I do believe the basic tenets are true at one level or another. I choose to have faith. I choose to believe, or at least not disbelieve. There are many things I do not “know,” but I am willing to suspend disbelief and accept them on faith.

I tried that approach on our bishop, ending with, “That is what I mean when I reply in the affirmative about those questions.” And he said, “That is totally acceptable.”

So, as my wife and I say to each other every day, “I can't believe we are doing this.” It is such a relief to my wife because I know how much she wants to be there if our daughters get married in the temple. But she will not do it dishonestly. And neither will I. But the “temple marriage issue” is not the major reason we are doing this. We are doing it for ourselves and each other and because it feels right. And we both agree it's different from when we joined the Church about twenty-five years ago. This time we have our eyes wide open, knowing the problems, as well as the blessings, it has to offer. Unlike when I was a new member, I don't curry the favor of the big shots by trying to act like the perfect Mormon and say what I think they want to hear. I speak my mind on issues, regardless of whether it is the politically acceptable position in Church circles, but also I try not to be offensive or argumentative. It feels good.

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"We felt as if we were being pulled into a loving current."

"John's" story (consolidated)³

I CAME ACROSS the Church through a college roommate who had a Book of Mormon. I called the local ward and began a long investigation. I was troubled by a few things but others drew me in—e.g., the concept of an eternal family.

At that time, I earnestly sought a "definite" testimony, which would be beyond challenge, transcend rationality and logic, and that would form the basis for a decision about the Church and the future course of my life. Nothing of this type came. I eventually made the "leap of faith" on the basis that things seemed and felt right. There seemed to be some legitimate evidence for the Book of Mormon, and therefore the Church was most likely true. I had discovered *Dialogue*, and its content actually eased my decision to join. I decided to live "as if" I knew the Church were true.

I got married during my Church investigation, the timing of which was heavily influenced by the fact that we were "living in sin." We decided to start our family a couple of years later, and we were married in the temple shortly after the birth of our first child. Our family was raised fully in the Church. Our son served an honorable mission and the oldest two were married in the temple. All are active in the Church.

Once I was established in my career, I was called as branch president of a unit likely to become a ward, and it seemed as if I might soon be called as a bishop. At this time, my original spiritual quest, along with the questions and issues that distressed me, slowly came from the "back burner" to the forefront of my mind.

I once again sought a "definite" testimony—an experience, in whatever "format" was appropriate, which would solidify the spiritual foundation for the next years of my life. I went into the forests and mountains; I prayed alone in the branch president's office. I acknowledged my very human flaws and limitations and just asked God for knowledge that would enable me to serve him much more effectively. But again I was left to myself.

An analogy I often use in referring to this relates to the "ask and ye shall receive, knock and it shall be opened" concept—I felt as if I had been pounding my head against that door until it had been bloodied, but nobody was going to answer.

I discussed these issues with our stake president and others. Nothing changed. I

eventually asked to be released as branch president, since it seemed ill-advised to have someone who wasn't even sure of God's existence serving as the "spiritual leader" of others. This was a period of depression and great discouragement for me. I had always been prone to a somewhat melancholy state of mind, but no longer having any "foundation" for my life greatly exacerbated it.

Since that time, almost fifteen years ago, nothing of substance has changed in the "definite testimony" department. It seems increasingly unlikely I will receive the revelation I have consistently sought. But I haven't abandoned hope completely, and I remain fully open to spiritual experiences. We attend sacrament meeting most of the time. I maintained a temple recommend to be able to attend our children's temple marriages, but currently I feel disillusioned. Were it not for the havoc it would wreak with our children and grandchildren, I would likely become inactive.

The bottom line is that I don't have any axes to grind, no preconceived notions. I have always been completely open, honest, and receptive in searching for the truth, and have always, simply, wanted to know what is true. Who knows, I may yet receive the "light and knowledge" I have always sought and then be able to have something to offer others.

A Worrisome Sentence

I WAS SURPRISED recently when my ward's newly called high priests group leader came to my home and said that I was probably not qualified to teach in priesthood meeting. He quoted from the *Church Handbook of Instructions* (1998), Book 2, Section 1, page 166, which says, "[Priesthood instructors] should have strong testimonies of the gospel."

Encountering something like this is not a problem for me. I've successfully dealt with this testimony/faith issue all my life. This worrisome sentence in the *Handbook* won't change my commitments. We'll work things out in my case without much trouble.

What I do worry about are the numerous struggling, testimony-building, or wondering (but faithful) members who would take "offense" or feel "unacceptable" were they told they can't be full participators because they don't have a "strong testimony." Many will feel like second-class citizens. Others will leave active participation. And those who remain will miss out on the great testimony-

building experience of teaching.

If this issue comes up for you, I suggest you handle it the same way many Borderlanders have chosen to handle the temple recommend questions. (See the comment on this in "Jared's" story.)

Shortly after my group leader's visit, I wrote a letter to F. Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency (with whom I have had other communications about "faith and testimony" issues). I expressed concern about the "requirement" as written in the *Handbook*. I wondered if it might not be prudent to have the committee responsible for this paragraph consider a change or a caveat. For example, it could be modified to "[Instructors] should be strong faithful members of the Church," or "[Instructors] should be worthy to hold a temple recommend."

Brother Watson replied by mail directly to me (not through my bishop, which is a good sign) that my suggestions "have been noted." To me, this response is another encouraging sign. Changes like this take time, of course, but maybe we'll see something new or different in the next edition of the *Handbook*.

IT seems appropriate to close this column with one of my favorite scriptures, which directly applies to the fine people who shared their stories here. The Lord told Joseph Smith: "To some it is given. . . to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . . To others it is given to believe on their words" (D&C 46:13–14).

It is vital to remember that it is a gift to be able to live the gospel by faith alone. This is the gift given to many Borderlanders. But it would seem more like a gift if all Church members would simply recognize faith (as a motive for living the gospel) as a gift, not a burden or a deficit. ☺

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-third), 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 columns are available on my website, www.forthosewhowonder.com.

2. Excerpts from other notes from Jared can be found in the May 2005 and September 2005 issues of SUNSTONE.

3. I will place a longer summary on the Sunstone blog, www.SunstoneBlog.com.

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