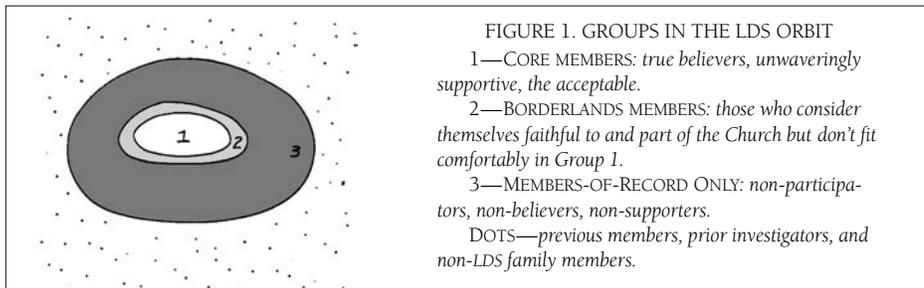


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

IS LIFE IN THE BORDERLANDS
WORKING FOR YOU?

By D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, I share interesting news, letters, and comments; revisit the temple recommend interview discussion; and present suggestions to enhance the Borderland experience.¹

Recent Communications

Following are excerpts from recent reader comments and interactions I've had with Borderlanders via email, letters, and in person. All names are changed, and some details have been edited.

From "Peter": I recently read an article on the beliefs and practices of the various and often very active people in the different branches of the Jewish faith. It reminded me of your Borderland classifications, but with more categories and with widely different believers still being active and faithful. . . . It would be nice if Mormons with various beliefs and different practices could feel more accepted in the main group—as simply other faithful types but every bit as much still "Mormons."

From "James.": I just downloaded and read your December 2006 column, "The Borderlander's Gift," a very uplifting message. I am a recent convert, baptized around a month ago, and have often wondered if I will ever gain a strong testimony. Your article has given me hope.²

My response to James: Testimony is a personal experience, and everyone is different. Some come to "know" things quickly; others never "know" anything. Those are the extremes. I suggest that you take from (and give to) Mormonism all that works for you and don't worry too much now about "testimony." Eventually you'll find out how "true" the Church is for you.

From "John.": While sitting in church, I kept thinking of the people here in my ward in Orem. They are very good at working in how many times they get through the Book of Mormon a year or how inspiration comes to them. But I'm not sure I see a "reaching down" to us [in the Borderlands]. Oh, they are friendly enough, but not in a warm and personal way. It is like if you aren't on a self-directed course to the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, then maybe you are seen as risky, as someone who might taint them if they interacted with you on a personal friendship level.

My response to John: I appreciate your struggle about interactions with Group 1 members during Sunday settings. In many ways, the three-hour block seems more of a ritual than a spiritual experience, worshipful experience, or learning experience. Everything seems so tightly controlled that only the "standard" answers, comments, and talks are allowed. It sometimes seems cold and

methodical for us in the Borderlands. From my experience, "personal friendship" relationships of the kind you are hoping for are far more likely to develop through interactions with neighbors, home and visiting teachers, and in settings outside the Sunday block.

John responds: It is hard to express the gap I feel. I'm not perceived as a Borderlander because I don't say much, and so no one could know. I don't speak up often for several reasons. I can't hear well enough at times to really get all the fine points of discussions in lessons, so I keep quiet because I worry about saying something which is off the mark of what is really being discussed. Second, I don't see any time in the lessons for a laugh. Teachers are well-prepared and although a few might enjoy a laugh, there is "serious business" going with too little time to get through it all. Also, what I am smiling about or having a different perspective about might not come out correctly if I tried to interject. My thoughts are alternative thoughts, and I smile inside about funny things I have experienced and seen in others.

When I lived outside the Wasatch Front, I always felt such perspectives added some human outlook, but here there is no time for that. At times I wonder if there is the idea of a special breed of super souls. People flock to "Zion" to give their family a deep Mormon experience, and indeed flocking may benefit them, guaranteeing a full program for their children or giving them comfort as they age and want to feel secure. But I see a huge reservoir of talent which is taken out of the world and cloistered here. Oh, yes, religion can be practiced, but in some ways, there seems to be too much ease built into it all.

My ward is very friendly, but what is missing is that I've never been invited to a study group, a dinner group, or a book club. It may be that I'm not playing the role of those with super motivation and I wouldn't stand out to people who seem to be looking for close contact with those who express their same feelings. You are right that the Sunday block is not the ideal place to interact in these ways, but right now the block is all I have. I realize some of this is up to me, but the effort required is too much, especially when yoked to those who seem to have a somewhat different agenda. At times, I feel I ought to just bag it and not seek for friendships but export whatever abilities I might have to some place outside this area (a mission) and forget about myself because it isn't going to happen here. There isn't time. There is too much competition for the time.

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

From “Mark.” I recently discovered your Borderlands columns. I am gratified to see you express some of the conflicts (and ways through them) that I’ve picked my way through over the years. You seem happy with your “Borderlander” status. For whatever reason, I’m not able to maintain quite your placid state. For the most part—as long as I don’t take the Church too seriously—I’m fine. Once or twice a year, though, things get interesting. I’m right now in the cool-down phase of one of those periods where I think I’d be happy to wade through brimstone up to my armpits to land a stout punch on the nose of whoever writes [a certain Church publication].

In the past, I have written letters to [a particular General Authority] about my concerns. But I’ve never sent them. I figure the Brethren have heard it all before. In their place, I’d probably be annoyed at receiving letter after long-winded letter from hordes of disaffected “ones” while trying to attend to the needs of the ninety and nine.

Jeff: I sometimes write to the Brethren if I see something that warrants a letter. Most of my letters are written to thank them when they say or write something that I think is insightful or very helpful for Borderlander-type issues. I usually try to be positive, business-like, cordial, and keep the letter to one page. I sometimes invite them to respond through my bishop, and I provide his name and address. Some of the Brethren do respond.

Mark: In his April 2003 General Conference address, “A Prayer For The Children,” Elder Holland describes skeptics as those who “always seem to hang back a little, who at the Church’s doctrinal campsite always like to pitch their tents out on the periphery of religious faith.” Elsewhere, he has suggested that these people merely “want to be clever or independent” or are “cynical.” This description may imply that those on the peripheries of the “doctrinal campsite” are there by choice, and if they choose, could merely pull up stakes and pitch their tents closer to the center. To me, it doesn’t work that way. Elder Holland was, however, absolutely correct that the skepticism of a parent may be multiplied in his children. I completely agree. So what do we do about it?

Jeff: First, keep in mind that Elder Holland spoke of “doctrine.” I don’t think most Borderlanders have much trouble with doctrine. Our concerns more often relate to history, social affairs, policies, and feeling ac-



AT TIMES, I feel I ought to just bag it and not seek for friendships but export whatever abilities I might have to some place outside this area (a mission) and forget about myself because it isn’t going to happen here.

cepted. Second, if we give our children the freedom to think and choose, as well as an excellent opportunity to participate and evaluate the Church for themselves, then we must be prepared for whatever they decide to do. It is unfortunate that after making their assessments, many young “thinking adults” choose not to have full participation in the Church. But if we’ve been fair in sharing our beliefs and reasons for our continued engagement as a Borderlander, I don’t believe we would fall under his charge of being “cynical” or acting simply from a desire to be “clever or independent.”

From “Paul.” My daughter gave me a subscription to SUNSTONE for Father’s Day this year. The *Ensign* has always been cookies and punch for me. SUNSTONE provides a good balance. It is very stimulating to my mind. As I read your column, I realize that I am a long-term Borderlander and would like to contribute my story, as you call for readers to do, but I think I would need to be prompted.

Jeff: Okay, consider yourself prompted: Why have you been in the Borderlands for so long?

Paul: Why have I stayed in the Borderlands?

(1) [Mormonism has] been my life for more than forty years. It’s the only religion I’ve ever known.

(2) I have never wanted to disappoint my folks. Truth be known, I’ve been a disappointment to them all of my life—especially to my dad.

(3) I do have a testimony of most things, but I do wonder and question at times.

(4) I’d be lost without my LDS friends. If I left the Church, I’d have to make new friends outside the Church. At times, I wish I had more friends on the outside. The Church preaches that we should make friends with people of other faiths, but it keeps us so busy

with activities and meetings that we hardly have time to take care of family responsibilities—let alone go out and make friends with outsiders.

(5) I would not want to disappoint God, either—any more than I already have.

(6) If I left, I’m convinced that I would no longer be worthy of God’s watchful care nor the multitude of blessings that he pours out upon me.

(7) Without the influence of the Church, I’m afraid I’d find reason to live a lifestyle not in accordance with the gospel. I’m a celibate, in-the-closet gay.

Jeff: What pressures do you feel to stay or to leave the Church?

Paul: The pressures to stay with the Church come from close friends, family, and priesthood leaders. Also, as I mentioned, guilt and fear are incentives for me to remain engaged with the Church. Pressures to leave, on the other hand, include extreme boredom. Also, I feel an inner pressure at times to go out and explore life and not be tied down to responsibilities.

A few months after our first exchange above, Paul sent this message. I haven’t been set apart yet, but, like you, I have been called to a Church service mission. I will report about the second week of March. I returned recently from a trip to Salt Lake City to meet with my supervisor. I’m really looking forward to this new venture in life.

This may sound strange, but I still harbor those feelings that I expressed to you regarding my reasons for staying, while at the same time acting and speaking in quite another way. Call me duplicitous, I guess. But, that’s the way I am. While I’m on my mission, no one will ever know or see the side of me that I have revealed to you.

Jeff: Why do you feel the need to be so secretive?

DUPLICITY, I suppose, causes me to lead a double life. I'm comfortable with it for now, but I know it destroys some people out there. I'm duplicitous because I must survive, I guess.

Paul's response. For the simple reason that if I were to divulge any of these feelings while on this mission, I might be asked to resign. Had I expressed feelings like this earlier to either my bishop or stake president, I may not have received a recommendation. Service missionaries really have no rules to follow other than the one big requirement: one must be temple-worthy. And I am.

Jeff: What does maintaining that secret and the duplicity do to you?

Paul: Duplicity, I suppose, causes me to lead a double life. I'm comfortable with it for now, but I know it destroys some people out there. I'm duplicitous because I must survive, I guess.

Jeff: Will you be able to cope with this duplicity for long?

Paul: I have been coping my whole life. I've been doing it for so long that it is a big part of who I am. I don't even think about it. It comes very naturally to me now.

Paul is now on his mission. We had the following conversation over lunch recently. Paul, what do you think would happen if you were honest or upfront with the people you now work and serve with?

Paul: I don't even want to think about that. I am determined to finish this mission. I absolutely love serving in this capacity. If I were totally honest with all the guys I work with, I'm quite sure I would be marginalized, especially about my being gay.

Jeff: Have you heard of BYU's new policy about their gay students? (See story, page 78) Some have called it: "Do ask; do tell; don't do." How would this new approach to being more open and honest about your sexual orientation fit with you?

Paul: The policy could change, but there are still two problems. (1) Just because a policy is changed doesn't mean people's biases and internal acceptance criteria will change just as quickly. (2) I can see the new policy as potentially dangerous in that someone may misuse it to snoop into and investigate private lives. So for right now, I can't see it working for me.

Honesty in Interviews

AT the recent Sunstone West symposium in San Francisco, one of the commenters in a session on faith development said the following (slightly paraphrased): "I have found for myself that being dishonest about things had terrible conse-

quences. . . . I would like to have a talk with the author of the Borderlanders column someday, because people have to be honest, otherwise they carry terrible consequences with them that will burst out."

This comment is very disturbing to me, for regular readers of this column know that one of its underlying foundations is the importance of honesty—both with ourselves and with others. But anyone who has written for publication knows that readers will sometimes misinterpret or misremember what they have read. Hence, I'm very grateful for this chance to clarify my position on honesty, especially regarding worthiness interviews.

Perhaps the misunderstanding arose when this symposium attendee confused my words with another's comments in a Borderlander column. In the March 2005 column titled, "Honesty," I shared "Sandra's" story. In it she told us, ". . . I also recognize that I might be a hypocrite. To get a temple recommend, I agree to statements that I don't believe. In essence, I lie. I do not like this, but I do not believe any greater good would be served by my quitting the church and hurting my husband and children."

In that column, I suggested that it is important for all of us to (eventually) come out of our closets and to gracefully and carefully become honest with those around us. It is not easy, and we may leave some things unsaid. But what kinds of LDS-compatible personal religions are we creating for ourselves if they are based, even partly, on dishonesty?

In the September 2005 column, in a response to "Ted" who also asked about temple recommend questions and "lying," I responded:

Yours is a familiar dilemma. Having recently re-obtained a temple rec-

Pontius' Puddle



commend myself, I know the quandary, but it . . . doesn't require lying. In fact, honesty is the best policy here. When asked, "Do you have a testimony of . . .," you can respond, "Well, I may not *know* everything, but . . ." then choose statements that fit your situation best, e.g., "I'm willing to accept that it is true through faith," "I'm willing to behave as if it is true," "I don't really 'know' *anything*, but I accept that it could be true," "I hope and pray it is true," and so forth.

Ted then asked me, "How open and honest should we be with other members if we have questions or haven't yet received the gift of knowing?"

NHOW OPEN and honest should we be with other members if we have questions or haven't yet received the gift of knowing?

My response to Ted was, "Honesty is one of the cornerstones of our religion. It is my testimony that when we are honest with ourselves and with others, we avoid the conflicts, the guilt, and the stress that comes with practicing a subtle deceit."

Finally, in the same column, regarding my own then-recent temple recommend interview experience, I wrote,

When I went to see my Stake President about my mission call [and obtaining a temple recommend], he asked me the regular temple recommend "do you have a testimony of . . ." questions, and I responded, "My testimony is mostly faith-based rather than knowledge-based." He said, "Well, in the end, isn't that all any of us have?"

To conclude, and I hope this will clarify my position to this symposium attendee, I strongly advocate honesty. If people feel they have no choice but to lie or deceive, I suggest that perhaps they should consider moving on to some other place where they can be honest. As some have suggested, it is better to be an honest outsider than a dishonest Borderlander (if those are the only two choices). And others have said that the main reason for going to the Borderlands is so that they could finally be honest.

Doing the Borderlands Thing?

SOME members who are struggling with "acceptability" issues that seem to be leading them to leave the Church occasionally wonder whether the Borderlands would work for them and write to ask my advice about staying in the Borderlands. I usually suggest staying (at least for a time) and making the most of it. In order to help them prepare to make the best decision possible for them, I often give them the following ten suggestions:

1. Learn something about what it means to be a "Borderlander" by reading past columns and my book *For Those Who Wonder*. (See Endnote 2.)

2. If you decide to try the Borderlands,

make a personal commitment that you're going stay in the Borderlands at least until you've moved beyond anger, frustration, and confusion and can maturely decide on a more permanent solution to your problems—moving back into Group 1, staying in the Borderlands for the long-term, or, if necessary, moving on.

3. Discuss your tentative plans with significant others who may be impacted by your choices and who will understand and be helpful—e.g., caring parents, spouse, children, friends, bishop.

4. Begin the process of developing an LDS-compatible personal religion. (I discussed this in my November 2005 column.)

5. Decide how much Church activity you'll continue with.

6. Determine whether or not you're going to keep/get a temple recommend.

7. Determine how much and how fast you will divulge "the truth" to others. Set a tentative timetable and make a plan for sharing your feelings and experiences with others and being more honest with them about your situation.

8. Join, participate in, and sustain healthy support groups. Sunstone can serve well in this capacity for many. Avoid ex- and post-Mormon websites and discussion groups at least until you've stabilized a bit, because these groups often come into being around

the perspective that people *should* leave the Church. Allow Sunstone and other groups to be healthy places to get your bearings before deciding what to do about your membership and other engagements with the Church.³

9. Stay flexible; make changes to your plans as necessary.

10. Give your situation or problem plenty of time to be completely resolved. (Maybe even in the hereafter?)

BORDERLANDS life isn't always easy. Best wishes to us all. ☺

Please send me any
of your experiences or tales
from life in the Borderlands.
D. Jeff Burton
jeff@eburton.com

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-fifth), 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.

2. All Borderland columns and the book *For Those Who Wonder* can be downloaded for free from www.forthosewhowonder.com.

3. I will be organizing a Borderlands session at the 2007 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium to be held 8–11 August. Please put it on your calendar!



BOARDED UP

The end has been
happening for years.
The warped boards
are diaries
of rain. Termites comb
years out of wood.
Sparrows, a concert of them,
suspend in the rafters.
Absence remains,
grown tall in a doorway.
Chipped plates
fill up
with the moon.
The silence
of a black telephone
waiting to ring.

—DON WINTER