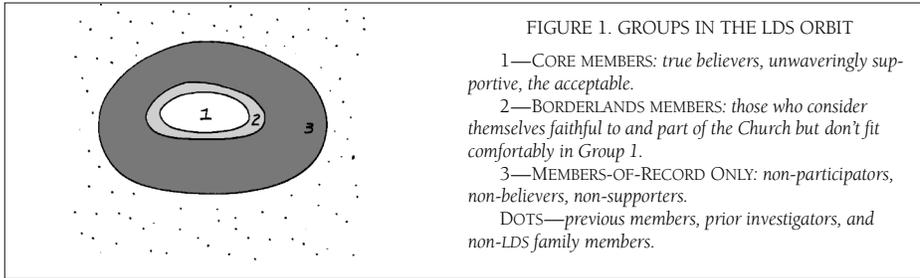


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

GUILT, GIRL,
AND GOSPEL

by D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, I share the experiences of two Borderlanders and an update from Kristin (December 2007). I've edited details for brevity, clarity, and to protect identities. Our first story relates themes many Borderlanders experience: feelings of guilt and the ties that bind.

JENNY: I just recently discovered SUNSTONE and your Borderlands columns.¹ I'm definitely a Borderlander and have been much of my life. I grew up in the Church near the East Coast. My parents were and still are very active. My mother has been in Relief Society presidencies my entire life, and my father has been in and out of bishoprics, stake presidencies, and other leadership callings. A fond childhood memory is going with my father and sisters to Boy Scout events.

I was married in the temple at age twenty to an amazing man. He is a true believer but has been very accepting of my Borderland status. During a storm when he was fourteen, he was hit by a falling tree branch in the ward parking lot. He believes that if he had listened to a voice of warning, he would not have been injured and would not now have a disability. It was a seminal religious experience that has affected his life ever since.

JEFF: How did the accident disable him? Does he feel like it was punishment for "not listening?" Does he feel a lot of guilt?

JENNY: The branch hit him on the head and caused a permanent neck injury which left his left arm withered and weak. I asked him if he thinks the neck injury was punishment. He said no, but when I asked him if he thinks he would still have his health if he'd listened to "the voice," he said, "Yes, but it is what it is." I think he sees it as a punishment but calls it something else to avoid feelings of guilt.

JEFF: How would your husband describe the voice he should have been listening to? Was it an audible message ("Don't walk under the tree.") which he purposely ignored, or (much more likely) was it, "I felt an apprehension at the time and didn't recognize the message?" He might be carrying around an entirely unwarranted sense of guilt. Few of us believe God is up there devising little traps for us. And any god who would set up that kind of test and subsequent punishment for kids isn't a god most Mormons would recognize.

JENNY: He said he remembers hearing a voice say something like, "Don't go under that tree in this wind." He said he doesn't know why he did not listen to the promptings. So the, "I felt an apprehension at the time and didn't recognize the message" category sounds most applicable to me.

JENNY (about a week later): Something new—I decided to resign from the LDS Church. I've sent my official letter to the

bishop. Unfortunately he is not willing to put it right through. He wants to come and talk to me (and tell me I am going to hell, probably).

JEFF: Wow! That's a big new development! What precipitated your decision at this time? You hadn't mentioned that you were thinking of resigning your membership. How has your family reacted?

JENNY: What precipitated this event? I had just had enough! For a long time, I'd been thinking about resigning. The lack of a decision was making me crazy. If it really becomes an issue with my husband, then I'll have to figure something else out; he is the most important aspect of my life. My husband is furious, but I will love him no matter what. But he's tough; he'll get through this. Anyway, after I die, he can marry someone else in the temple so he will get that celestial life he wants. (Ha, ha.)

Last night, I slept the best I have in years! I feel such a relief; this huge weight has been lifted from me. I feel so much happier. I haven't told my kids yet nor my extended family. I don't plan to tell them 'til I see them again. I know this sounds crazy, but I feel like my life has started anew.

JEFF: Okay, but a slow and steady forward motion can help avoid the rocking-boat syndrome. Maybe before your bishop pushes this through, you should see about getting counseling with your husband and plan a future that works for both of you and your children. It's a messy business, and you don't want to disrupt others' lives too much.

JENNY: Well, my happiness lasted three days. My husband became very despondent and depressed. I have never seen him this way. So I went to the bishop and got my resignation letter back. It was awkward. But, most interesting, now my husband feels guilty! He thinks he guilt-tripped me into not resigning.

JEFF: Well, what have you learned from this experience?

JENNY: Here are a few things: 1. It is okay to be yourself, but figure out what you value most; then decide how what you do will affect you and your family. When my husband became despondent and depressed, I decided right then it was not worth it to me to see him in pain. 2. Be adaptable.

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OUR next story is a common experience for young intellectual Borderlanders.

TIM: I'm a Church investigator, so I'm kind of in the Borderlands, wondering if I should join the inner circle. I never expected to be in this position, but I met and had a promising relationship with a Mormon girl. We never spoke about religious issues, and frankly I had no idea there could be any problems. People cautioned me, but I assumed it was because of aspects such as the Word of Wisdom. Many people cannot give those behaviors up, so being with a Mormon is not possible for them. But I don't drink, smoke, do drugs, or believe in sex outside of marriage, so I figured, "Big deal."

Well, as you can imagine, I soon found out the real reason her Mormonism was problematic: celestial marriage. After agonizing over our situation for a few days, she told me she had to have a temple wedding because she had felt it was right ever since she'd been a little girl. That was that. We were both respectful and didn't question or encourage the other to change our faiths. But we decided that we had to say our goodbyes. That was about a month ago.

Last week, a friend's wife pulled the situation out of me. She gently chastised me for not at least looking into what Mormons believe (actual belief, rather than rumors). She felt I was already halfway there with my moral beliefs. I promised to at least give it a look. So, right now I'm looking into some of the more fundamental sources as well as

accounts from ex-Mormons. I have definite concerns about historical factors as well as a few doctrinal problems. Whether those are well founded or not is another issue and something I'm hoping to figure out.

JEFF: Does your motivation to study Mormonism include the possibility of getting back with your girlfriend? Or is your interest strictly for yourself? What are your motivators here?

TIM: I've asked myself this question numerous times during the past two weeks. When things originally came to a close, I hadn't considered the idea of looking into Mormonism, nor did she ever push me towards it. We haven't spoken since saying our goodbyes last month. We might have been hasty but felt that continuing as friends would be too hard since our feelings for each other were as strong as ever despite the situation. But if I'm being totally honest with myself, I must admit that some of my efforts have been motivated by her.

JEFF: Making major life decisions is complicated. It never hurts to investigate anything, and Mormonism is certainly worth looking into. You're obviously a curious and intellectual person, as well as someone tuned into the spiritual side of life. You can be reasonable and rational in this quest. If your major motivating force becomes your relationship with your ex-girlfriend, your work and study can include determining how far you can go in adjusting your thinking and behaviors to meet her needs. Most couples do this on various issues, religion being only one. We all make accommodations, but being honest with yourself and others as you make them is best.

TIM: Okay, I've done some hard, honest self-reflection. Looking deeply made me realize that the girl most likely is my primary motivation for investigating. I don't think I was necessarily being self-deceptive, because there are definitely other factors that drew me to investigate Mormonism: a community of people with similar values, an outlet for doing work for others, and just as important, an avenue to get some kind of spirituality back in my life. These are all things I didn't realize I might be missing out on before I met her, so it still could reasonably be said that I'm looking "because of" and not "for" her.

JEFF: You have two important, intertwined issues that need to be dealt with as such.

And there are ways to find a middle ground with others. My uncle, a life-long, non-true-believer in Mormonism, went along with my aunt's need for a temple marriage, but he didn't participate much after their marriage (although he often attended church with her). Happily, their marriage went well because my aunt loved him, saw the best in him, and always defended him as a "good, honest man." They were together for almost fifty years. If your girlfriend sees you as the kind of man she admires and wants to spend the rest of her life with, regardless of your religious attachments, she will accommodate your needs and meet you half way. If she is looking only to marry a true-believer, then you have two choices: Either you will have to become a true-believer (which could happen after your investigation of Mormonism, who knows), or you will have to be dishonest and pretend you're a true believer (which has certainly happened in some cases but is not advisable). Why don't you simply express to your girlfriend what you've said to me? I don't think it would be too emotionally troubling for her. At least you'll know where she stands, what she expects, and what she thinks of you as a person.

TIM: I think you are right. If I talk to her candidly and honestly, I don't see her being upset. I guess part of me is afraid to open things up again and be disappointed. But if she needs a true-believer, that doesn't really say anything about her feelings towards my qualities or who I am as a person. I suppose I already know the answer to how she feels

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about me. The last day we spent together she kept saying she wished time could stop forever, so we could be together. She may still want a true-believer, but I guess if that is the case, then I can know that it wasn't a rejection of the core "me." I'll let you know what happens.

TIM (several weeks later): Since my last email, I've done a lot of reading, thinking, and researching. We did, in fact, end up talking, and it was fairly interesting. We talked about what she believed, and I was pretty shocked how attached to the Mormon Church she is. It was not at all apparent when we first got together. At one point, she said that even if the Church is not true, and she could know that, she would rather not know the information. She said, "I have so much history and comfort in the Church that I would rather not know that truth." This statement really blew me away and, honestly, did not sit well. It actually saddens me that people could be brought up and conditioned in such a way that they would dedicate their life to something regardless of whether or not it is true.

Anyway, based on how she was acting and some of the things she said explicitly, I could tell that her feelings for me were coming back. So I've decided to not contact her again even though she thinks that the door has been reopened for at least a friendship. Should she contact me, I'll do my best to be there in the way I can be, but I don't want the same situation to rear its ugly head again. I still care about her as a person and, accordingly, I'm going to do my best to make sure nobody gets hurt again.

HERE'S an update from "Kristin" whose story was related in the December 2007 column.

KRISTIN: I want to update everybody on our long journey. Last December, my husband and I decided (yet again!) that we needed to re-evaluate our situation and what we wanted for the family. Through some spiritual experiences, including a very real and felt connection with our grandparents who have passed on to the other side, my husband and I decided to give Mormonism another chance.

Here are the reasons: (1) Mormonism is my heritage, and there is power and goodness in passing on this strong heritage to my children. Plus I love the youth programs. They can't be beat, and I've looked around at other options. (2) There is good-

ness here. Can I love and be loved? Serve and be served? Feel God's presence there? The answers are yes. (3) I had what I believe is a "tender mercy." Some of the burden of caring and thinking and fretting so much about issues such as Church history and polygamy was lifted. Not that I have rock-solid answers, but I realized that these issues really do not affect my everyday walk and way of life, so why let them take up so much space in my head? Much better to enjoy each day, be present for my children, love my husband and enjoy the *now* of my life, which includes my ward community and very LDS family.

I was able to attend my brother's temple wedding in June. I'm so glad I was there and felt worthy and happy to be there. I am not attending the temple much, but I don't feel the need to push myself in that area. This past August, my husband baptized both of our boys—the ten-year-old who had never been baptized and our eight-year-old. (I'm attaching a couple of pictures from that day; I thought you'd enjoy seeing them.) We got special permission to hold the baptism outdoors at our family cabin. It was one of the most precious memories of my life, and I'm sure it will be a tender memory for my sweet boys.

Now, I don't mean to make it sound *too*

"happily ever after" because I'm sure there will be future bumps in the road. But I feel quite strongly that I have chosen Mormonism for better or worse. It's who I am, and I feel liberated by letting a lot of it just wash over me instead of bother me. My bishop called me to be Primary pianist (a calling I'd hoped and prayed for!), and they are leaving my husband alone for now.

Life is good, Jeff. I am happy to say that I feel as if I've reached a different place with my spiritual journey. To be honest, it's because I am not taking it all too seriously, but embracing and honoring the parts of Mormonism that I love and hold dear. ☺

NOTE

1. Copies of all previous Borderlands columns are available for free download at my website: www.forthosewhowonder.com.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

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HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



"I know! I know! First ya do something wrong!"