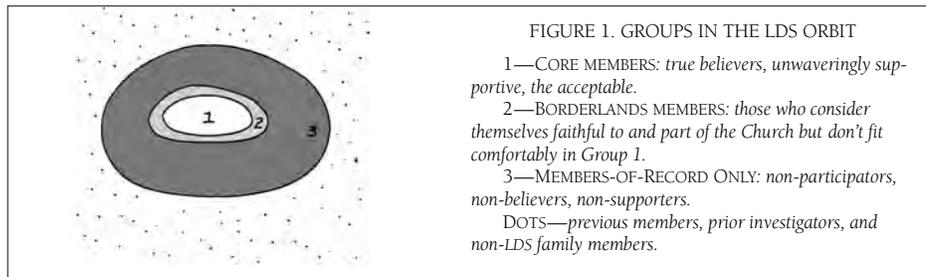


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

PROTECTING AND
STRENGTHENING
YOUR MARRIAGE

by D. Jeff Burton



DURING THE PAST month, I have exchanged emails with “Will” (not his real name), a professional with a young family, concerning his movement into the Borderlands and the troubles he has confronted. While reading his responses to my standard questionnaire, I saw that Will’s marriage was suffering the stresses common to Borderlanders.¹ Maintaining one’s marriage is a difficult but absolutely essential thing to do while traversing the Borderlands. Here is Will’s story (some details changed) interspersed with my comments.

WILL’S ANSWERS TO THE
STANDARD QUESTIONNAIRE²

How would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

I come from a very active family. My mother was Relief Society president; my father was a bishop and served in a stake presidency. I was a little wayward sometimes but never wandered too far. Mostly I was just curious. I served a faithful mission, went to BYU, and married in the temple. Three of my four siblings are local church leaders.

What is your current status in the Church?

I recently let my temple recommend expire and attend church about 50% of the time. But I am still an elders’ quorum teacher and an on-call ward financial advisor.

What issues / events / actions / concerns caused you to move into the “Borderlands?”

About five years ago, one of my siblings left the Church. I was appalled at my family’s inability to entertain the idea that someone could leave the Church and still be a good person. These events caused me to begin addressing the questions I’d been suppressing for years; my studies had led me to see Church history and doctrine in ways very different from those of many mainstream members. Multiple moves associated with my job and ongoing schooling relieved the social pressures of full church activity for a time, but my cognitive dissonance grew until I finally had to come out to my wife about a year ago. It turned out to be a huge relief for me—not so much for her.

Why did you stay in the “Borderlands” instead of moving into inactivity or leaving the Church?

The undesirable social consequences were the major reason. My birth family had proved to me that they have difficulty separating personal morality from Church ac-

tivity and testimony. And I’ve been too busy in professional life to deal with the inevitable fallout associated with telling them. Also, the fact is I don’t resent the Church. I’m grateful for its influence in my upbringing, and I’m not sure I know a better way to guide my own children (7 and 4 years old). I still gain some benefit from service opportunities and the helpful maintenance of my moral compass that some Church activities provide.

How does this situation affect you (emotionally / spiritually / physically)?

The effects of moving into the Borderlands have been huge. The move dominates my free thoughts. When I think about how my birth family will eventually learn about my status, I feel great anxiety. But I’m especially sad about how this has impacted my wife. She feels as if I’ve “duped” her. She’d converted to Mormonism partly because of me. However, I now feel more enlightened and comfortable in my own skin. I feel relieved of the burden of maintaining a testimony that defies logic. But it has been a taxing process for me and my wife.

How are you coping with the situation?

I cope by engaging in personal study and getting into discussions with those who know my situation.

How open and honest are you with others about your situation?

I speak openly with my wife, the brother who has left the Church, and an ex-Mormon friend. Everyone else gets a very watered-down version. I try to judge how much each person can tolerate and tailor my self-exposure accordingly.

What would it take for you to be honest and open with others?

I would be open if I were specifically questioned by a family member or friend. Otherwise I have decided I won’t announce anything until I have more time, energy, and desire to deal with it—or until I am forced to (e.g., when my son gets baptized).

How has your Borderlands experience affected your spouse and others?

My wife tries hard to be supportive but at times grows weary of my questioning, criticisms, and inactivity. In many ways, how-

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ever, we've become closer as we have discussed, studied, and worked through these issues. We've been forced to consciously consider how we want to raise our children and what is important. The rest of my family is largely ignorant of my status despite my wife's frequent hint dropping. I think they would be very hurt to find out about me.

What will you do in the future?

At the moment, I am happy with where I am. If my work life allows more free time, I could foresee an increased level of Church activity, but reseeded my testimony would require a convincing supernatural manifestation. If I could continue perpetually in my current state, I probably would. But I imagine that in time, my family will become aware of my beliefs, and I'll be forced to take a more definitive stance in or out of the Church

E-MAILS EXCHANGED AFTER THE QUESTIONNAIRE

JEFF: Since you let your temple recommend lapse, have there been some concern/questions from ward leaders? How are you dealing with that?

WILL: The lapse occurred about two months ago, and the bishop hasn't mentioned it. Perhaps it just hasn't crossed his radar. I haven't dealt with this yet.

JEFF: Why did your brother leave? Is he out of the *Church* or out of the *church*? Is he also out of your family? Did his own family leave with him?

WILL: Being a university professor, my brother has always had questions. He told me that after his years of honest inquiry and study, the chips kept falling on the side of skepticism and disbelief until the discrepancy became too great. It has been a tough trail for him to blaze considering my family's reaction, but he is out of the Church completely. His wife is a returned missionary and still mostly active, so his status has absolutely led to strained relationships within his own family.

JEFF: What happened when you confessed to your wife that gave you that "huge relief?" How did she handle it? What did the two of you do together to make a continued relationship possible?

WILL: She had been aware that something was going on for a long time but never pushed me on it. One day the bishop called us in to ask me to be youth leader. I knew I would enjoy working with the youth but felt that it would have been disingenuous to not disclose my testimony struggles. So, with her there, I started laying out a few of my concerns. She was as taken aback as he. At the end of our relatively brief conversation, he expressed his gratitude for my honesty but extended the calling anyway. I accepted it. However, it has been difficult to play my role while still being honest even though I'm amazed at how easy it is to slip back in to "true believer speak" when participating at church.

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. . .

JEFF: How long was it before you "came out" to the bishop and your wife?

WILL: I had isolated my spiritual/intellectual belief struggles from my wife for about three years thinking I was sparing her suffering. I thought I needed some time to figure some stuff out before I had to explain myself. I knew that I was changing the groundwork of our marriage and felt guilty, but I also knew that I couldn't keep it a secret forever. I'm pretty sure that she was vaguely aware of my struggles, and to say the least, felt betrayed by my secrecy. However, she has been open-minded which has made re-establishing an ongoing religious discussion between us an enjoyable process. I have seen others who have had great struggles due to difficult-to-reconcile differences with their spouses

JEFF: Do you think that the fact that your wife was an adult convert made a difference in how she responded? My guess is that a true-believer from birth might have reacted differently.

WILL: The fact that my wife was an adult convert absolutely facilitated the processing of this issue. But she is also a very level-headed person in general. The mindset I was raised in—to believe completely in every detail of every truth claim of the Church—is vastly different than the testimony she gained of the practicality of the Church as a social instrument, a good-as-any belief set, and a way for her to show her devotion to me when we were dating. But she also struggles to sympathize with some of my hang-ups. She thinks I should disregard the bad and embrace the good.

JEFF: Regarding your brother who left the Church: Do you have a sense of how he and his wife have dealt with that issue?

WILL: Though until now they've been able to talk through it, I know it has been and continues to be more difficult for them than it has been for us. As I mentioned before, his wife is active and continues to take their three kids to church, but my brother has become increasingly displeased with the Church and is starting to oppose their attendance. Their bishop was involved at first and initially advised her to leave him—which she didn't. She understands my brother's issues but chooses to stay true to her faith.

JEFF: Just a few thoughts for your consideration. First, if his stake president knew of the ill-advised counsel given to your brother's wife, that bishop would likely have been corrected. Second, you'll likely be able to find a constructive approach to baptizing your son. For example, some families ask a revered grandfather to do it ("to honor him"), and no one thinks to ask any questions. It could be that you choose to do it yourself, anyway. Many others like you have found baptizing their children to be a rewarding experience.

Third, you may find it best to let your understanding of Church history and doctrine be secondary when you and your wife make family decisions. Better to base your activities and decisions on the needs of your children, your wife, and yourself. Use the parts of the Church that help you and your family and adjust for that which doesn't. The Church is an excellent guide

for many of its members, but all of us have a personal religion and a personal relationship with Deity. Develop a model that works for you and your family situation. It will likely incorporate involvement with the Church.

One last thought. Even if right now you feel resentful, angry, or competitive with the Church, these feelings and their importance to you will likely subside as time passes. Let that time go by before making any big decisions.

STRENGTHENING YOUR MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

IN the 1980's, I was a lay-counselor working with LDS Social Services (now LDS Family Services). I developed about seventy couple-relationship-strengthening exercises and activities. These were eventually gathered into a workbook, "How to Do I Love You." I compiled the book to help couples establish strong and loving methods of dealing with the challenges, conflicts, and changes that inevitably visit every couple. An example is when one partner wants to modify his or her religious activities because his or her outlook on the couple's previously shared religious beliefs changes. Unless good techniques are available for handling such challenges, even strong and stable couples can stumble badly. If you would like to strengthen your relationship with your spouse or make it easier to be open with each other, you might find it helpful.³

Below is a quick checklist from the workbook of desirable couple behaviors and attitudes. How does your relationship check out?

Checklist for Maintaining a Loving Relationship

• *Commitments and Responsibilities.* We have made specific and positive loving commitments to each other ("I will care for you"); we avoid conditional and negative commitments ("I will care for you if you live up to my expectations," or "If you don't care, I won't care,"); and we don't use threats. We accept responsibility for that for which we are accountable.

• *Care and Concern.* We work at being caring towards each other. We have developed a Caring Contract between us. Everything that we do or say is first passed through the filter, "Does this show that I care?" We try to use Jesus's teachings about

loving others as our guide.

• *Emotions and Feelings.* We work to tune into and understand each other's feelings and emotions. We recognize that little can be done to avoid negative or unwanted emotions but that they can be managed. We work together to create emotions that we both enjoy.

• *Expectations and Wanting.* We work to understand the expectations and wants of each other. We know that unknown, unspoken, assumed, and unreasonable expectations and wants cannot easily be met and can lead to misunderstandings, disappointment, and anger.

• *Affection.* Our relationship carries a constant feeling of affection for each other.

• *Kindness and Patience.* We try to treat each other with kindness and patience, but because these are not natural reactions to stressful and hurtful situations, we know that we must plan in advance and commit to behaving constructively. We have agreed that we will choose to respond in a kind, patient, and caring way when problems arise.

• *Forgiveness and Forgetting.* Because we all err, we know that on occasion, our loving relationship requires us to forgive. We follow the principles of repentance and recompense. We avoid retribution and revenge. We recognize that "forgetting" is a symbolic act which means not letting an unfortunate incident interfere with our loving relationship.

• *Communications.* We know the importance of understanding each other. We tell each other what needs to be understood. We are tactfully honest with each other. We listen to each other actively but without judgment or criticism unless we are invited to. And then we respond only in a caring manner. We have learned the fundamentals of good couple communications.

• *Understanding and Empathy.* We try to place ourselves in the other's shoes; we try to see an issue from the other's point of view. We become "one in understanding" before making important decisions. We tune into each other's non-verbal communications and ask about them.

• *Respect and Goodwill.* We respect each others' judgments, opinions, needs, wants,

and expectations. (Not that we always agree.) We know that we can share our fears, shortcomings, and faults with each other because we know that we respect each other.

• *Equality and Sharing.* We treat each other with equality. We take each other into account in all of our activities and decisions. We are as important to the other as we are to ourselves.

• *Problem Solving.* We work together to find solutions to our problems and issues. If we cannot agree on a problem solution, we find acceptable ways to "agree to disagree."

• *Friendship and Nurturing.* We are each other's "best friend." We are friendly with each other.

• *Trust and Faith.* We trust each other. We trust that the other will not knowingly hurt us.

• *Compromise and Sacrifice.* We compromise. We accommodate each other's needs and wants. We make sacrifices for each other as warranted and reasonable.

• *Fun and Humor.* We do fun things together. We appreciate the humor in each other. We laugh together.

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. If you would like a copy of the questionnaire, please contact me at jeff@eburton.com. It is a great way to organize your thinking and start a conversation with me.

3. A download of the workbook is available for free at www.forthosewhowonder.com. Paper copies are available at AMAZON.COM for a nominal price.

*Please send me your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.*

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