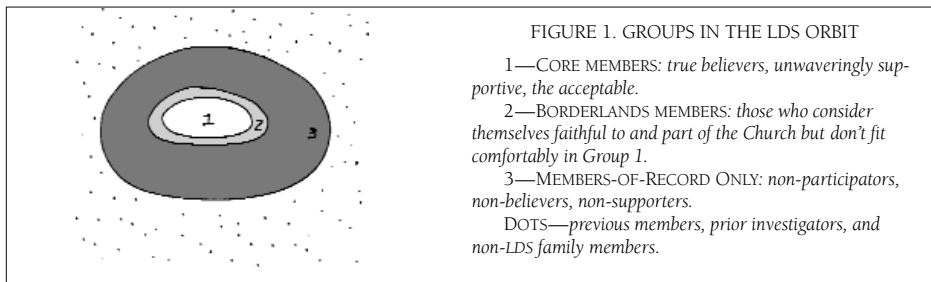


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

CONDUCTING A SELF-ASSESSMENT

by D. Jeff Burton



Know thyself.

—GREEK APHORISM

To thine own self be true, and [you cannot] be false to any man.

—SHAKESPEARE

AT THE 2010 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (Session 124, 5 August SL10124), John Dehlin and I hosted a spirited discussion with about a hundred attendees about their individual Borderlander experiences. We primed the discussion with a short questionnaire. Several attendees returned copies of their completed forms for compilation purposes. I have summarized the discussion and participant results below in hopes that other Borderlanders can see their own experience in a larger context. How do most Borderlanders begin their journey to the edges of Mormonism? What experiences do they go through? How do they often end up?¹

As you go through these questions, conduct your own self-assessment. But make sure to keep these points in mind:

- This questionnaire is intended to compare your intellectual beliefs with your church activity, not your faithfulness with church activity.

- This questionnaire asks you to probe your innermost feelings and thoughts. Because they often concern normally pri-

vate items, you may never have asked yourself these questions before. You'll need to be thoughtful and honest as you answer.

- There are no right or wrong answers to this questionnaire. Also, there are no definitive outcomes or conclusions that will apply to everyone. We'll offer a few observations for you to think about below, but how you interpret your results is strictly up to you.²

QUESTION 1. *In which group(s) in the "Borderlands" model would you categorize yourself?*

- Group 1 = 5%
- Group 2 = 78%
- Group 3 = 17%
- Dots = 0%

Given that our session was devoted to Group 2 experiences, we expected this result.

QUESTION 2. *How much do people know about your Borderland status and your actual beliefs, outlooks, questions, issues, or problems? For example, how much does your spouse actually know about your situation?*

- Averages:
- Spouse = 80%
 - Children and/or parents = 80%
 - Close friends = 60%

- Ward/stake leaders = 45%
- Other relatives = 40%
- Ward members and neighbors = 40%

A hopeful sign, these numbers turned out generally higher than in similar polls conducted in the past. In a 2008 poll, for example, respondents reported about 50–60% when stating how much their spouses knew about their questions.

QUESTION 3. *At about what age did your questions seriously begin? At about what age did you feel you actually left "Group 1" status? How many years have passed since then?*

- Age when serious questioning began:
- 10-30 years old = 60%
 - 30-50 = 40%

- Age at which left Group 1:
- 10-30 years old = 60%
 - 30-50 = 40%

- Number of years since leaving:
- 10-30 years = 60%
 - 30-50 = 40%

The way you answer these two questions can suggest possible outcomes for you. For example, those who leave Group 1 at an early age often have more choices and more time to work through their questions. Early leavers are also less likely to destabilize a marriage or family. On the other hand, those who leave at later points of life often have the wisdom and experience to deal with the fallout better.

QUESTION 4. *Were you ever a "true believer?"*

- Yes = 78%;
- No = 22%.

True believers who move out of Group 1 usually carry more baggage than those who were never true believers (like me) who may simply be relieved to finally be finished with their fruitless quest for a testimony.

QUESTION 5. *Has your Borderland status adversely influenced your personal relationships and other aspects of your life? If so, how much on a scale of 1 to 5?*

- Marriage/Dating—Yes, 80%;
- How much? = 2.1

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Children/Parenting—Yes, 33%
How much? = 3.3

Friendships—Yes, 100%
How much? = 2.1

Job/Income—Yes, 22%
How much? = 1.5

Mental health—Yes, 45%
How much? = 3.0

Physical health—Yes, 40%
How much? = 1.0

Adverse effects on relationships appear universal for Borderland members. Knowing this can help you plan for these upsets and deal with them constructively.

QUESTION 6. *On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your success as a “Borderlander.”*

1 or 2 = 10%
3 = 45%
4 or 5 = 45%

This high success rate is good news for new Borderlanders. If, however, you score yourself as having “little success,” getting a hold of books like *For Those Who Wonder* or seeking professional counseling may help you on your journey. If you rate your success as “high,” you might share your approaches with others in person, in online forums, or through this column.

QUESTION 7. Following James Fowler’s book, *Stages of Faith*, in which faith stage(s) would you place yourself?

Weighted averages:
Stage 1 or 2 = 1%
Stage 3 = 8%
Stage 4 = 62%
Stage 5 = 25%
Stage 6 = 3%

Having a religious “Borderland” experience is not unique to LDS people. In fact, according to Fowler, healthy curiosity and even skepticism about certain religious claims can lead you to higher stages of faith. Note also that it is not unusual to be in more than one stage at a time.

QUESTION 8. *Rate your belief in unique LDS tenets (0 = don’t believe, 3 = don’t know, 6 = know it to be true.)*

Average = 2.8

QUESTION 9. *Rate your belief in general Christian tenets. (Same rating scale as #8).*

Average = 4.5

Questions 8 and 9 can be constructively related and compared. Note that Borderland members attending this Sunstone Symposium session were much more likely to believe in Jesus and Christian principles than in the unique claims of Mormonism. If you have a similar result, then you have a “testimony” of the “truthfulness” of Jesus and Christian principles (using LDS parlance). Knowing your actual belief situation in different realms can help you deal with the issues and problems you face.

QUESTION 10. *Do you feel you must, or want to, stay active in the Church? If yes, how much? (1 = a little, 5 = a lot.)*

Yes = 89%

The average score of those who answered “yes” was 3.5, and over 50% answered “a lot.” If your own answer is “yes,” you can work on finding ways to stay involved in the Church at a comfortable level of activity. If your answer is “no,” you can begin to explore healthy ways of moving on that are not too disruptive to yourself or your family.

COMMON BORDERLANDS QUESTIONS

OCCASIONALLY I am invited to join a group for lunch or to attend a party, study group, or other gathering at which I am typically asked questions such as the following. My answers may assist you as you conduct your self-assessment.

• *What generally happens to those who suddenly find themselves in the Borderlands?*

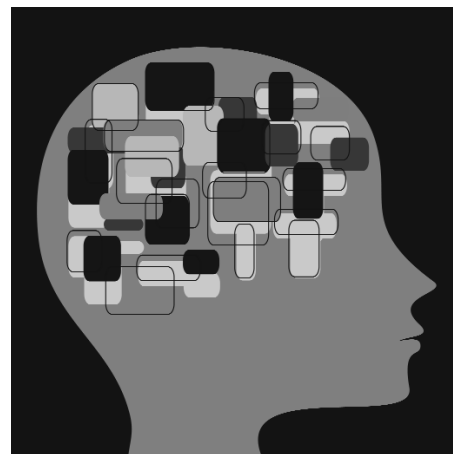
My experience is that they are likely to experience a lot of frustration, anger, fear, and anxiety; they often have feelings of loss, helplessness, loneliness, and alienation, though there may also be a feeling of relief. But not many new Borderlanders understand what to do next. They often make destructive choices in the heat of the moment such as quitting the Church too soon or “dumping” on family or friends. I usually suggest giving this “loss” experience six months of processing time before making any decisions.

• *After you find yourself in the Borderlands, how likely are you to stay in that state? Can you be in more than one group?*

Some people find themselves simultaneously living in two or even three groups, depending on circumstances. For example, people may be very Group 1 when it comes to supporting the Church’s youth programs and service activities but be Borderlanders when it comes to Church history. Or people may find that they move back and forth between Groups 2 and 3, depending on, for example, whether or not a close relative is getting married in the temple.

• *How long do people usually stay in the Borderlands?*

In my experience, most sojourn a few months to several years in Group 2 then move on to Group 3, sometimes with subsequent movement back and forth between Groups 2 and 3. As reported in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, the Church’s own statistics suggest that about 80% of baptized members worldwide eventually go into inactivity or leave the Church (move into Group 3 or beyond). But some people I have known have stayed in



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Group 2 over their lifetimes with varying degrees of comfort and success. (I count myself in this number). But remaining in Group 2 requires a conscious decision to do so followed by continual effort.

• *Is leaving Group 1 reversible?*

Reasons for leaving Group 1 vary widely. No two people experience this movement the same way. Those who leave Group 1 for faulty reasons (imagine someone catapulted into Group 2 because they read on the internet that “Joseph Smith was a convicted horse thief”), can safely return to Group 1 when they get the facts straight (“No, he wasn’t a horse thief.”). However, more typically people leave Group 1 because they have questions that cannot be fully explained to their satisfaction, such as issues related to Book of Mormon historicity, the discovery of Joseph Smith’s colorful history, the Masonic roots of the temple ceremony, the origins of LDS scriptures, the treatment of sexual orientation in the Church, the priesthood, or family issues. The Church’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute and FARMS provide a body of apologetic work and should be studied as thoroughly as other information, but many people find this apologetic work lacking.

• *What if you are in the closet about your issues and to all outward appearances seem to be a full-fledged member of Group 1? Which Group would you be in?*

The way I define it, Group 2 status is determined by your mind, not by your behavior. Many Borderland members are fully active temple-recommend holders, but in their minds, they know they don’t belong with the “true believers” of Group 1.

• *Who determines a person’s group status?*

We must each do this for ourselves. The self-assessment can help one decide.

• *Is it rare to be a Mormon Borderlander? How many Borderland members are there in the Church?*

During the 1980s, the Church Correlation Department conducted an unpublished study among English-speaking members which suggested that about 5% of

active members were actually disbelievers and that another 20–30% had unresolved questions and issues. If these statistics are still accurate, that would suggest that a lot of people sitting in church on Sunday are, at least in part, members of a closeted Group 2. Given the impact of the Internet since the 1980s, I would guess that the phenomenon of the Borderland member is probably more widespread than it was in the 80s.

• *What could the Church do to address this “Borderland member” phenomenon?*

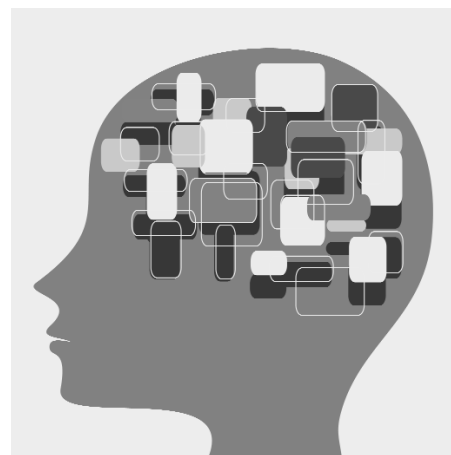
In my mind, the best approach is for the Church to expand the boundaries and acceptability criteria for Group 1 membership to encompass Group 2 members. Let it be okay, for example, for a faithful member who happens to not believe in Joseph Smith’s prophethood to obtain a temple recommend and to participate fully in every aspect of active Church life. This would require changing policies related to testimony, temple requirements, and other acceptability issues that drive people into the Borderlands.³

• *Do you detect any Church movement in that direction?*

My personal perception is that the Church at the general level has been moving in a liberal direction for several years. According to a recent *Salt Lake Tribune* article, what missionaries and others write or say about the Church on the Internet “need not be corrected” by Church authorities if it represents the person’s personal beliefs. This policy seems to say, “What you believe is your own business,” and that seems hopeful to me. The Church has also sponsored a TV ad campaign that emphasizes the diversity of Church members. Both of these developments suggest a slow expansion of acceptability criteria which someday could incorporate many Group 2 members. Unfortunately, it sometimes takes years for subtle changes at the top to trickle down to the local level.

• *Is Group 2 or the “Borderlanders” a real group? Can I join?*

No, we have no official membership structure, as such. Most of us have enough to do dealing with our Church memberships. We don’t want to appear to be competing with the Church.⁴



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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. A more comprehensive self assessment is found in my book *For Those Who Wonder*, which is available free at FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

3. Several years ago, during a lesson I was teaching, I told my high priest group that I was not yet a true believer in the Restoration but that I was fully supportive of the Church and its missions, and that I had a testimony of Jesus. A week or so later, our high priest group leader appeared at my door and announced that because I didn’t have a testimony of the Restoration, I would no longer be permitted to teach the high priest group. The justification for this action came from the Church’s Handbook of Instruction which stated a policy that a priesthood teacher should have a strong testimony. Unfortunately, this kind of deliberate marginalization is not an unusual experience for those who are open.

4. This is my 38th column. All columns are available for free download at FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

Please send me your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.

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