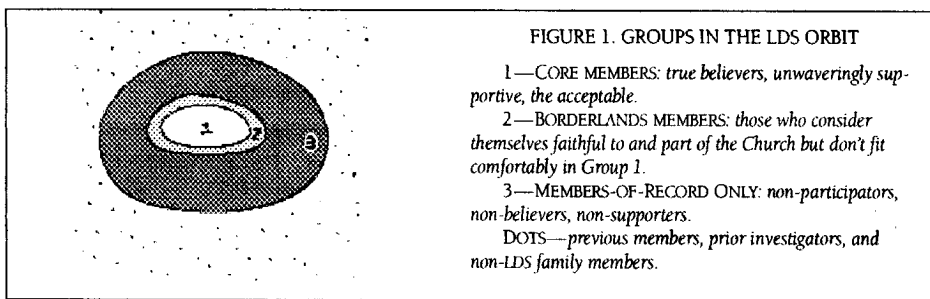


## RESPONSES TO BRAD'S DILEMMA AND FINDING A SUITABLE MATE

by D. Jeff Burton



I RECEIVED THE following emails from readers of our last column concerning “Brad,” who finds that his Borderland status complicates his dating life. Names and some details have been changed.<sup>1</sup>

FROM RYAN: In my dating experience, being honest can be trying, but everyone deserves honesty in the dating relationship. When I hear the inevitable “Are you an active Mormon?” question from an LDS woman, I respond with “Mostly,” or “Sort of.” When she asks what I mean, I typically say that I am a liberal, agnostic Mormon. The reaction is sometimes comical—some women physically step back from me, as if they might catch something. Some don’t know what I mean. Others want to debate me into believing. Others want to bear their testimony, which can feel uncomfortable because I used to bear testimony just like that.

FROM JASON: My experience might give hope to Brad and others like him. After I got back from my mission about a decade ago and entered the requisite mating game, I came to think that because of my growing naturalism, skepticism, and doubts, I couldn’t easily marry a “true believer.” I wouldn’t have been able to articulate that description of myself then, but I can see it more clearly today. In retrospect, I realize that I wanted to marry a Mormon to please my family, to have peace of mind, and to

fulfill my childhood expectations. I really didn’t know (in so many ways!) how to proceed, so for a while, I just dated a few girls once or twice and then moved on, unsure and somewhat frustrated.

At that time, I was studying science at college, and for friendship and community, I frequented our off-campus LDS Institute of Religion. It seemed the logical place for me socially, but I felt I absolutely had to keep my questions, doubts, and skepticism to myself; and I did. Because I saw them in the halls of my department, I knew several Institute girls were studying in my field. I thought that they must have questioning minds, but I never thought to ask any of them, “Do you know the Church is true with no reservations?” It was not a question I could ask in those days. So our conversations always remained surface-level.

One day, in an Institute class, one of these girls (who I thought was quite attractive) asked a question of the instructor that suggested she had a skeptical streak. It was something like, “What is wrong with trying to prove the Book of Mormon’s historicity with archaeology and other sciences?” So after class, I got her phone number from the instructor. He wasn’t supposed to do that but must have felt sorry for me. I got up some courage a few days later, called her, and was surprised to learn she knew who I was. In those days, I didn’t think any girl would know who I was or be interested in me. We met many times after that, eating at the cafeteria together, going on an after-

noon walk, studying in the library. We seemed to be building a friendship, and I liked her. It helped that when I didn’t know what to say next, I could fall back on topics in our shared studies.

The Church was a common subject of conversation with us, but we didn’t dwell on any “mysteries.” However, I suspected from her comments and mannerisms that she might have a liberal bent concerning religion. One Sunday, she went with me to my ward meetings, and I noticed that she rolled her eyes when one of the bishopric stated bluntly in a Sunday School class, “We brought the talents and all we learned in the pre-existence into this life. We’re here in this Church because of our successes in the pre-existence.” My heart leaped a bit when I saw her almost imperceptible reaction to something that has no hard scriptural support.

At our next lunch together, I very carefully and casually asked her about her testimony. She hesitated and then said that she didn’t have a testimony in the regular way. She actually put her hand on mine (our first physical contact) and explained that her interest in science and the scientific method didn’t seem to allow her to have a sure knowledge about mystical things. In fact, she was mostly skeptical about such things. A very good feeling suddenly rippled through me. We didn’t go much farther that day, but my heart was soaring.

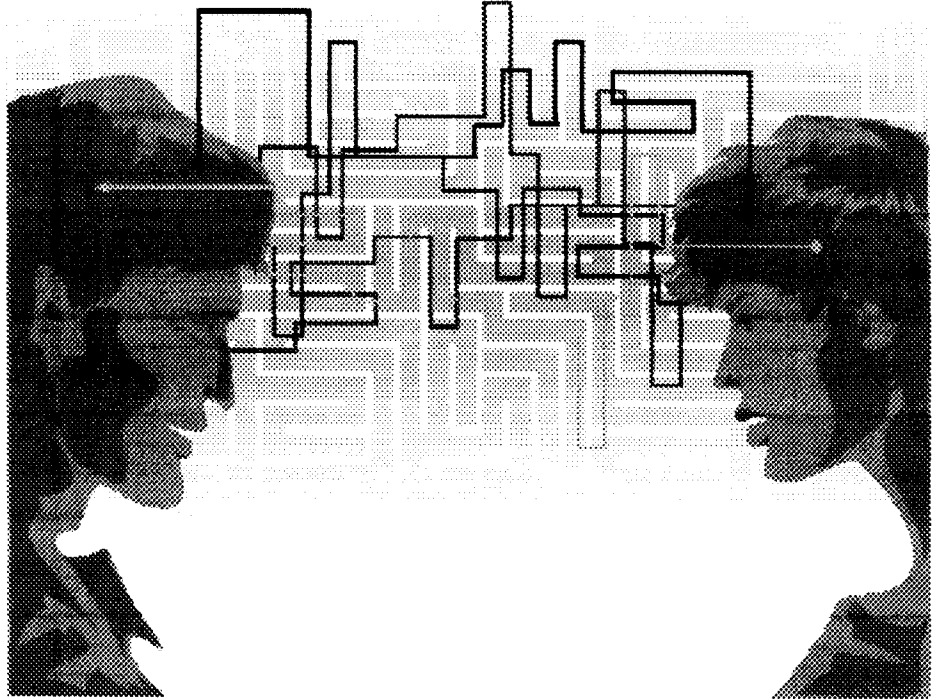
One thing led to another and over time, we discovered that we were quite compatible in our outlooks on religion and life. Neither of us had ever felt free to talk candidly with others about our questions, doubts, and concerns, so our conversations were exhilarating. We had a few differences, such as how to handle money, where to live after graduation, and how much to be involved in the Church, but in about a year, we married in the temple. Now, two children later, we are very happy and content. We have a lifestyle built on love for and accommodation of each other. I feel tremendously blessed that fate, God, or pure chance brought us together. Although we live and move quietly in the Borderlands of the Church (another story), our little corner of the world is quite satisfying.

So, my suggestion to all Brads (and Bradesses) is to look carefully for someone just like them. Their counterparts are out there looking, too. And perhaps be a little more forward about your uniqueness than I was. There are dating services online, for example, that let people advertise for the kind of person

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they're looking for. That might work.

FROM DUSTIN (a young Borderlander who has lost his "knowing" testimony but wants to remain active in the Church and would like to get his "knowing" testimony back or at least find a satisfying arrangement so he could stay with the Church): I have a girlfriend whom I really love. She is an "Iron Rod," to use Richard Poll's term, and doesn't really know or understand where I stand. I have struggled deeply with a desire to be what she wants while retaining my own integrity. I cannot make myself believe in the Church like I used to. And trust me, I want to believe. I want to know that the Church is true. I want to be an "Iron Rod." But wanting it doesn't make it so. So I remain frustrated. I remain fearful that my friends will misjudge me. I am afraid my girlfriend will dump me (which might be a relief in the end?). I have decided that I want to stick with the Church. I believe in God and have my questions about Christ, but I know what good the Church can do, and I want to be part of that. But what should I do about my girlfriend?



JEFF (TO DUSTIN): "Knowing" is a complex subject for those inclined to think about it. You might look up "epistemology" on Wikipedia. That entry has an excellent overview of the subject of knowledge, its nature, origins, and limitations. Not believing is not the same as disbelieving. Doubts, questions, and skepticism are a natural part of life for most people (but can be suppressed by those not inclined to follow those feelings and thoughts).

Your situation with your girlfriend complicates, matters, of course. If you are to continue with her, you will sooner or later need to be both honest and willing to make compromises and accommodations, as Jason has described above. But at this late stage, if she is not willing or able to go along with you as you are, you must be prepared to part ways. As I've stated in this column before, if she loves you for you, and for who and what you are, if she is able to trust you, she will likely find a way to make things work.

Consider the idea that we all are continually developing our own relationship to our Father in Heaven. When we are willing to allow others to have their own pathways to God (or no defined pathway, if that is the case), we can relax and even help them in their quest, as appropriate. This attitude could work for you in dealing with your girlfriend. Unfortunately, many true be-

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lievers are either unable or unwilling to reciprocate. You should explore these issues with your girlfriend before either of you commit to anything.

Another thought: your relationships to God and religion will change as you gain more knowledge and experience. Don't assume you've hit the end of the road. Life is a series of learning steps. What you and your girlfriend think, believe, or "know" at this time will likely change in a few years or even a few months.

Try this thought experiment. Imagine yourself and your girlfriend sitting in a pleasant place—say, a park bench. Both of you are in a good mood and feeling happy with each other. In this setting, imagine the

following conversation:

You: "I have something important I want to talk with you about. I'd like you to listen to what I have to say, and then I'll listen to what you have to say. Then we can talk more about it, both now and later. I think that you know that I love you and have the greatest respect for you, I want to make you happy in every way I can. That's why I'm bringing this subject up now.

"I just want you to know that although I don't have a "knowing" testimony of some things associated with the Church, I love the good things about the Church, and, more important, I respect your testimony and would never try to make you think or believe the way I do. But I do think that for us

to be happy together, I need you to know how I feel, and I need to know how you feel. I'm wondering if you can work with me on this. I need to know that you love me for who I am and trust that I wouldn't do anything to hurt you or undermine your beliefs.

"Now, I can see you're eager to respond, but hold your response for just a few more minutes as I complete my thoughts. Thanks.

"I'm also wondering if we can be really open and honest with each other, and, through our love for each other, work out a life together that meets both our needs and desires. For example, I know that you want a temple marriage and an active LDS family. I am willing to work with you to achieve those goals. For me, I need the freedom to be myself, to think and believe as I do, and to talk with you openly about these things. I need to know that our relationship won't suffer if I am honest with you.

"I need to know that we can communicate on any subject in a fair, loving, and understanding way, and then that we will both be willing to make adjustments and compromises that will make us feel comfortable being ourselves.

"Okay, that's all I have to say. Now, what do you think?"

An approach like that could begin a life-long arrangement that will leave both of you satisfied, fulfilled, and accepting of each other.

DUSTIN (a few months later): My girlfriend and I discussed my heterodox beliefs and doubts several times, leading to several inspiring spiritual conversations that we both enjoyed. However, despite being the "best boyfriend ever" (her words), she continued to have a hard time with my doubts. I tried to show her that I could act as a believing member and keep the commandments in spite of my doubts and questions. I even

got my temple recommend. My answers were not "Iron Rod," but I felt okay with getting my recommend.

At that point, we began to talk about marriage. Both she and I were in love and wanted to marry, but she said she wanted to pray about it first. I decided to go to an endowment session to receive some guidance of my own. My brother and sister-in-law came with me and acted as the witness couple. At one point, I looked up to see them kneeling at the altar, and the Spirit testified that I should marry my girlfriend. My girlfriend, however, didn't feel she was getting any response and still felt bothered by my doubts.

Then, finally, she did receive an answer. It was a "no." So we have broken up. It's painful; she still loves me, and I her, but she didn't see why we should keep dating if God told her 'no.'

I have been furious at God since, not only because he took a perfect girl away from me but also because he would be inconsistent, telling me "yes" and her "no." I don't trust him anymore. I'm trying to make sense of it all. I'll tell you this, I'll never pray about who I should marry again! I'll stick with Elder McConkie's plan, who said he didn't pray about marriage because he was the one getting married, not the Lord. This development has added more fuel to fire my doubts, but I retain my hopes.

JEFF: What an outcome! Sorry to hear that it hasn't yet worked out and that your faith in God has diminished.

I think we need to be very careful when making life-altering decisions. First, individual "felt answers from God" may not always be reliable. The "felt" difference between a yes and a no is sometimes small, and one can easily mistake one's own feelings, concerns, and fears with "the answer." We all know how unreliable some

"hunches" can be, how determined we can be when we want to get a certain answer, and how different environments factor in. If I pray at the edge of a beautiful forest or while listening to "Come, Come, Ye Saints," I get more positive answers than if I pray in the median of a freeway. Even Joseph Smith talked about being occasionally confused about the source of some of his inspiration.

To me, genuine love and its accompanying commitments between two people is a "yes" answer! God wouldn't let you two get that far, would he? He wouldn't break up two people who are genuinely in love with each other, would he? That isn't the kind of caring Heavenly Father we love and worship. I would be willing to bet that if your girlfriend discussed her story with any General Authority, it could have a different ending.

Perhaps you should discuss this again with your girlfriend.<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Copies of all Borderlands columns are available at [www.forthosewhowonder.com](http://www.forthosewhowonder.com).
2. A reliable source recently passed on to me some relevant remarks Elder xxxx included in a message to a small group just before last General Conference. Elder xx reportedly said something along the lines of, "A man may pray for guidance about whom to marry and expect Moroni to appear with a picture of the woman and guide the man to the woman's parents' home and introduce the two. The Lord doesn't work that way. He expects his children to pray, study, and ponder and also act."

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

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