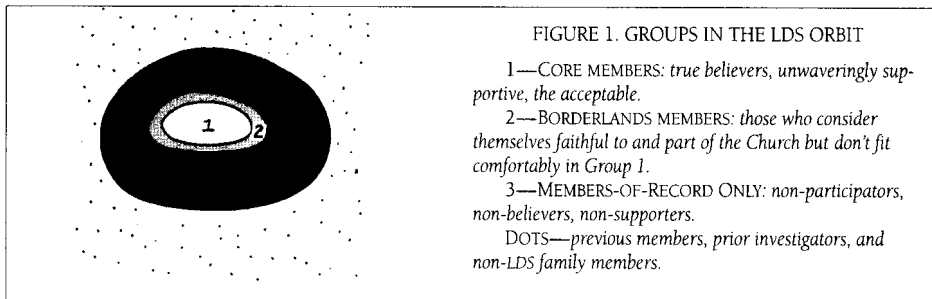


THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

by D. Jeff Burton



IN THE DECEMBER 2007 column I shared “Kristen’s” story about her family’s decision to start attending church again. This is an update to her story.

KRISTEN: From October through March, we attended church pretty regularly. The children went to Primary, I went to Relief Society, and we all went to sacrament meeting.

This seemed to be a decent routine at first. But it became increasingly clear from my grouchy moods after church, and from my husband’s feeling that our attendance was a pretense, that this was going to be a tough road. Week after week, I sat in my meetings thinking to myself, “I simply don’t believe this anymore. I have a fundamentally different view of how the world works, what constitutes spirituality, and what a relationship with God is all about.” I found myself trying to block out the words being spoken during the lesson and just focus on the picture of Jesus at the front of the room.

It all came to a head on Easter Sunday. The Relief Society lesson was about “the power of the priesthood,” and then sacrament meeting was spent reorganizing the Bishopric. Hardly a mention of what Easter is all about. This, playing off my normal frustration, combined into what you could call the perfect storm.

So my husband and I sat down and made another decision: Sunday would be devoted to family togetherness and fun times. The

miracle (and I mean that) in all this is the way my husband and I have forged this path together. I know situations like this can be a disaster otherwise. Our cooperation is probably the reason the children are faring so well. They see that Mom and Dad are happy. They continue to live in a home where they feel loved, respected, and treasured. They are encouraged to seek a relationship with God, to feel awe and respect for the fact that God is all around us, ever present.

So our home life still feels “spiritually alive.” We pray at meal times and bed times. We regularly talk of God and Jesus. We are very clear with the kids that we respect all religions, including Mormons. We don’t go much further into it than that.

So far we all seem to agree that having family time is a good way to spend our Sundays. Of course, this doesn’t erase the challenges that lie ahead, such as my kids possibly being excluded or ostracized for not being “in the fold.” But I just have to believe that times are changing and that today’s religious climate is not the same as when I was growing up.

So far, my children have been surprisingly unaffected by our newly reduced church activity at present. Certainly one of them may develop stronger feelings about it in the future. I think the difference now is that we are not attending any church, while, in our earlier inactive period, we were attending a Protestant church. Historically my oldest child has had the strongest feelings on the

matter. But we have come to find out that her feelings were very much driven by her friendship with the girls in her Primary class. She is now playing more with other girls in the neighborhood (from a different ward) so she no longer seems to be bothered that she might be “missing out” on Sunday.

However, I continue to serve on the Relief Society activity committee. When the presidency saw what was happening in my life, they called and asked if I wanted to be released. I said no. I see no reason not to continue in my current position of “hand-out deliverer.” (Isn’t that a great church calling?) I still go to Relief Society activities once in a while.

When I imagine being an inactive Mormon somewhere outside Utah (where I would not be surrounded by family), I think I could feel quite peaceful about our latest decision. I don’t think that God cares as much about whether I am an attending Mormon as he cares about the way I live my life and if I can find peace.

But when I think about how my parents and family might feel about me, I feel very sad and anxious. I would say this feeling of anxiety is not the Spirit telling me anything; it’s simply my sense of respect for and obligation to my parents. It’s the only thing that motivates me to try to make the whole thing work and hang with Mormonism. But I don’t think the desire to please my parents will hold sway much longer. The gap between what I am supposed to believe as a Mormon and what I actually believe in my heart is just too wide.

I think my parents have an inkling which way the wind is blowing for us, though. The fact that we have not baptized our son, who is now just a few months away from his ninth birthday, is a pretty obvious indicator about where we stand. For now, we are in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mode. This time around, I feel much less need to explain myself and my decisions to others. I feel much more that this is a personal thing and not really their business.

Maybe I’m settling in to the idea of becoming a true-to-myself adult who takes responsibility and has courage to do her own thing. It’s scary, but it feels good!

A thirty-something active Mormon, “Jacob”, is experiencing a similar “what to do next about my troubled Mormonism” decision-making process. Here are some of our email exchanges.

JACOB: One question I have concerns the dilemma of raising my kids in the Church now when I’m not so sure I believe it myself.

It just seems there are easier, simpler ways to raise a family than going through all the details of being an active Mormon. I have three kids young enough to make the change without too much disruption, but the entire family on my side and my wife's side are all active Mormons for the most part. So, because of these family issues, sometimes I think it would be easier to just remain quiet and a Mormon.

I know my parents and in-laws would freak if we were to "leave" the church. The relief I would get would be canceled out by the extreme grief we would get from family if we left. It seems like a no-win situation for me.

After years of callings that included elders quorum president, executive secretary to the bishop, Gospel Doctrine teacher, and most recently Young Men's president, I need to do something about my doubts.

I realize I can turn down callings, but I don't want to be "that guy" in the ward who doesn't do callings or who doesn't fit in. I have always felt that one of the main benefits of being Mormon is being a part of a community, where I feel like I fit in and am welcome. I feel that way right now, but I know that would change if I start rejecting callings and becoming very selective in what I choose to do in church.

JEFF: You're not alone. I would venture that 20-30% of mature active Mormons sitting in a typical U.S. ward today have faced similar concerns, approached a series of cross roads, and have chosen the "LDS" path, making adjustments to their activity and participation, as warranted and as possible.

It seems to me that the Church encourages and supports one basic form of activity and participation, which reduces the options for people like Kristen, you, and me. "Fully in,"

"in and keep your concerns to yourself," and "out" often seem like the major three options.

You might sit down with your spouse (your kids are probably too young), go over all the pros and cons of the pathways left open to you, and then decide how to proceed. But there is no hurry. Take your time. Have several sit-downs, as necessary. Then experiment, try out your chosen path(s), but be sure to give yourself the option to change your plans if what you have decided isn't working. Again, Kristen's experience is instructive, but your outcomes will be unique to you.

JACOB: Do you think there are bishops, stake presidents, or even General Authorities who are in the borderlands. or are closet doubters?

JEFF: Once when I was on the stake high council, a bishop whispered to me that he was basically a closet doubter, and another recently hinted at it over the phone with me. There is the old story that "Catholics in the pews believe the Eucharist is the Body of Christ, altar boys wonder if it is, and priests know it is not." In my limited experience, that scenario occasionally applies to the lower levels of LDS leadership.

Personally, I think our high leaders are true believers. For those few who may be closet doubters, it would take much courage and selflessness for them to give up the power, influence, and prestige that comes with the territory. The rationalizations ("I can do more good here in this calling," "It would hurt the church," "It would devastate my family," "It would ruin a lot of lives," "it would destroy others' testimonies," "I would be seen as losing my favorable position with God,") and the pressure to keep quiet (or not

to admit to questions and doubts) would be almost overwhelming.

Of course, you and I are experiencing similar trials, though with less at stake: how to deal with the multiple and sometimes conflicting challenges of honesty and trust, doing good, fulfilling our responsibilities, and family demands.

JACOB: I have been reading your book,² in which you mention that you could not be called to be a bishop, mission president, or other leader. My question is, why not? If you are an active, faithful Mormon, why couldn't you be called to any of those positions? Have you made it clear to your leaders that you're not a "true believer"?

JEFF: Yes, I tactfully let members and leaders know that I'm not a "true believer" but that I am a genuine supporter of and faithful to the Church, as well as a true believer in Jesus. The problem is, many don't hear or understand the qualifier, which can cause trouble.

But being candidly honest and faithful is apparently not sufficient for being called to many positions in today's Church. For example, the *LDS Handbook of Instruction* says that to be an instructor in a priesthood quorum, one must have a "strong testimony." In my ward, I have been prohibited from teaching in my high priests group meeting. Currently I am a coordinator of the Emergency Preparation activity and a home teacher. So, from my experience, coming out and being honest does put one at risk of not having a chance to hold certain Church leadership callings.

But that can be a minor issue for most of us. I have had plenty of teaching and leadership opportunities in and out of the Church.



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For example, I have served as the president of a national professional society, I've been a counselor in two bishoprics, and I've served two missions.

JACOB: What do you make of Joseph Smith? Was he a liar and con man, a delusional and confused man, a true prophet, or what? Also, how do you deal with the Book of Mormon?

JEFF: Now, these are bold questions, not often raised in polite LDS society! However, those who are curious enough to examine (not just “study”) Mormonism, those who have learned to think critically about all things in life, those who believe there are natural explanations for most things mortal, will have questions such as yours.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your outlook), there is no single definitive “Joseph Smith answer” for everyone because each person comes to these questions from a different direction and for different reasons.

However, here are some thoughts.

In a private conversation in the early 1980s, Leonard Arrington, the premier LDS historian of our age, told me that he was convinced that Joseph Smith was sincere in his work. I, too, have concluded (“95% confidence level”) that Joseph was not a con man

in his religious work.

As for delusional and confused, we really don't have any way of ascertaining Joseph's mental state. If he lived today, someone might diagnose him as having some abnormal mental condition in accordance with the DMS-IV, but we just don't have the luxury of being able to test those kinds of conjectures. However, I'm guessing that Joseph probably attributed some of his own thoughts to God's inspiration. But, before we go pointing fingers, we should remember that we all delude ourselves to some degree. Perhaps Joseph was only as guilty as we are.

So, in the end, those who are “curious,” as you are, must decide for themselves who Joseph Smith was, who he is today, and to what extent they will take him seriously. We all have to determine what the level of God's influence was in Joseph's life and in our own.

As for the Book of Mormon, its historicity has certainly been a matter of great debate that has seen no clear resolution. But when considering the importance of the Book of Mormon's historicity, I think these questions are much more helpful when it comes to living day to day:

- How much faith and belief in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are you willing to accept?

- How important are Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to today's Church and to your part in it?

- Even if Joseph were a con man and the Book of Mormon a fake (and I'm not suggesting they are), does that necessarily mean that God couldn't or wouldn't be involved in today's Church or in the lives of today's members?

- How much credence should you give to your Mormon upbringing, the “burnings in the bosom” and “still small voices” you've experienced, plus any religious experiences that have suggested something to you about Joseph and the Book of Mormon?

Based on your answers to these questions and many other personal factors (spouse, family, job, history, temperament, desires, needs), you can determine how supportive and active you should be and how forthcoming you can be about your doubts. ❧

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the thirtieth), 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. See FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM for a free download of my book *For Those Who Wonder* and previous Borderland columns.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

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