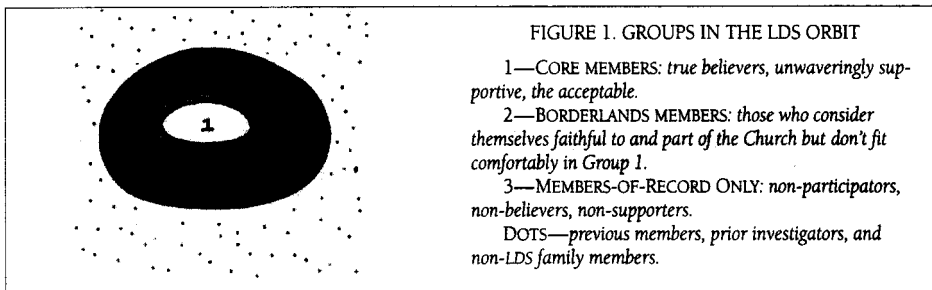


WHY WE STAY

by D. Jeff Burton



Through many of the Borderlands columns, we've been treated to the stories of members who have stayed and gone, and their reasons and motivations. Of course, all of us in the Borderlands recognize the main reasons for staying.¹ In an informal survey taken at the 2007 Symposium Borderlands session, major reasons for staying included:

- For the family = 55%
- Group-related reasons = 37%
- Job = 10%

The regular "Why We Stay" session at the annual Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium is popular and well-attended. Most attend to see if there are any new reasons to stay, or so I suspect.²

In August 2008, I was invited to speak as one of the "stayers." Following are some thoughts I presented at that session.

I think we know why many choose to leave the Church. For example, it's not easy for some Church members to remedy or reconcile often-perceived problems such as those in the Joseph Smith story, Mormon history, polygamy, Book of Mormon origins and theology, Pearl of Great Price origins and historical claims, male-dominated leadership, sexual identity issues, and temple issues. But, as one who has encountered many of these, I have chosen to stay.

Why? Well, that's a bit complicated.

In my thirties, I was lucky to find myself in "psychoanalysis." After we dispensed with some Freudian foolishness (well described by Woody Allen in his movies), I began to learn how to recognize the reasons

and motives for my actions and attitudes in all facets of life: business, family, and religion. It was an exciting time for me and well worth the effort. My psychiatrist and I talked week after week about such questions as, "Why did you do that? What else might have been driving you? Come on, dig deeper!" At the end, I had discovered many motivations in my life that I had not been aware of before. Thus began a lifetime of examination.

"The unexamined life is not worth living," said Socrates. Everyone claims to agree, and some, in fact, have already dispensed with this formality. One true believer in my neighborhood told me, "I've thoroughly examined my life—I've prayed hard, I've listened, and I've studied the scriptures." I wanted to say, "Okay, yes, that is part of the examination process. But there is so much more to it."

The most important concept I learned in psychoanalysis is that when one is examining one's life, one can usually uncover multiple levels of motivation. The "first-up" reason is the one we voice easily. It comes to us quickly; it is what we think others expect. It is easy to defend; it often sounds righteous. But it is not the only driver of our attitudes and behaviors and is usually far from the most important.

For example, why do I obey the Word of Wisdom? The first thoughts that usually come up are: we are commanded to do so; it is a test of my faithfulness; it will make me healthy; it sets a good example for my kids. These are the expected and acceptable responses we often hear and use during the

three-hour block of church meetings. They come to mind quickly.

But, digging down a level, we can find other less obvious reasons that still sound pretty good but are often ego-oriented: I want the blessings of obedience; I need to maintain my temple recommend; I want to be accepted as part of the ward; my parents expect me to obey.

At the deepest level, hidden away from consciousness, are other reasons and motives whose discovery needs real introspection, thought, and time. Dig down deeply, and maybe you will find some less inspiring motivations for obeying the Word of Wisdom: God will punish me if I disobey; I will get sick, maybe even get cancer; I will lose my high position in the ward/stake/church; my reputation would be ruined.

The existence of these multiple levels of motivation suggests that we need to find, understand, and manage *all* of our reasons and motives when making important decisions. Knowing all of our motives and understanding their influence in our decisions, actions, and attitudes can make it easier to decide if what we are doing is worthwhile, right, or good. To take Socrates one step further: the examined life can become the full life if we act wisely on the outcomes of our examination.

With this background, I can now present my current reasons and motives³ for staying in the Church.

First-up reason: To help those struggling in the Borderlands. This reason alone sounds pretty good. I could stop right here, but it's not the complete story.

Second-level reasons: I feel good when I'm helping others. I need to feel like part of a group; the LDS Church fills part of that need. Mormonism is deeply embedded in my life and my history. I'm a "participating student of Mormonism," so I can't leave. I want to be a Mormon follower of Jesus, a Mormon Christian. Others could be hurt if I go.

Hidden motives: Staying gives me the buzz of feeling as if I might be in Fowler's Stage 5, which is pretty far up there. I like the attention my writing brings me. I want people to like and admire me. I don't have anywhere else to go. I feel some anger and frustration at the system. I want to improve the Church. I feel some guilt at having not been completely open and honest in the past about my beliefs, and this is my penance. I feel some fear in leaving the Church.

Once I had identified the main reasons and motivations at all levels, I needed to confront some difficult questions:

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a former member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.

- Is it worth it to me to stay?
- Can I stay and be honest and ethical?
- Is staying good for my family?
- Will staying have more positive than negative impacts on other people?

For me, the answers point to yes. But admittedly, some of my motives are embarrassing and weak. Maybe I'm even still missing some reasons and motives. One thing is sure: I know I can't do everything for pure, "love of Christ" motivations. Nevertheless, I've decided to stay and keep doing my thing.

That's my "Why I Stay" story.

In the quiet of your room, you might ask yourself, "Why do—or why should—I stay?"

Look first for the first-up reasons, then second-layer reasons, then the ones hidden deeply at the bottom of the well. Get some paper and write them down. Work at it. Be honest. Be prayerful. Above all, give it time—this process may take weeks or months. Ask your spouse, friends, or a counselor to help you get to the bottom of the matter. Recognize that this is an asymptotic endeavor: always approaching but never reaching the target.

Then determine if your reasons to stay or leave are worth it. Ask yourself: What alternatives do I have? What are my options? What effects would result if I left? If I stayed? In what ways can I be more open and honest about this? What compromises can I make to allow myself to be both honest and a stayer? (Or honest and a goer?)

In my last column, the Wormwood story illustrated the complexities of honesty and its multi-faceted applications. When we talk about honesty and ethical behavior, we are usually confronted with the sticky problems of right versus right—much more difficult than right versus wrong. Each of us must determine which of the many options open to us are the most right for us.

Generally speaking for us as Mormons, the main questions confronting us as we think about staying/going issues are:

- Why do so many go?
- Why do some stay even after confronting the issues that drive many away?
- What can or should be done about it?

We will explore some of the answers to these questions in future columns, but for

now, let us recognize that many of the reasons people leave are not easy to remedy. But the reasons to stay can be enhanced, and when there are more good reasons to stay, then more will stay.

I recently received a very unusual email, dated May 2020. Having weird dates pop up on my old Mac is not unusual, but as I read the email, I realized it may have, in fact, been sent in 2020. I've dropped the sender's name and email address, but I think you'll see the relevance to what I've just written about "good reasons to stay." I'll close the column with this email.

Date: Friday, May 16, 2020; 12:30 p.m.>

Subject: Why We Stay—Your column in Sunstone way back in 2009

While doing some research, I happened upon your 2009 column on why you stay with the Mormon Church, and it made me wonder, why do I stay?

Let me mention just a few things that are working for me today.

I really appreciate the way the Church champions peace, rejects war, and insists on justice for everyone and the equality of women and men. I have the wonderful feeling that all are accepted just as they are. I appreciate the way the system trusts us.

I recently attended a friend's temple wedding. The overwhelming sense of hope and familial love that all of us—members and non-members alike—felt in that sealing room were unforgettable.

Every Sunday morning, I wake up with feelings of anticipation that continue as I get ready to go to the two-hour block. At church, the time just rips by! I wish we could stay longer! I leave with feelings of having great personal worth, and I am re-energized to live a life reflecting Jesus' teachings

When we study the gospel, I have the sense that all the lesson materials are balanced and that even when some ulterior or hidden agendas have crept in, we are free to question them. The lesson authors are clearly identified, and we are encouraged to respond with comments and suggestions for future revisions. Many sides of every gospel issue and historical event are explored. I know that I can ask any question or raise any concern, and I won't be judged harshly.

I'm thrilled by our efforts to lift up the poor, the widowed, and the sick, and the service we render to those less fortunate. I am honored to be able to support our various outreach programs—the missionary program, for example, which concentrates

on providing education and health services to the less fortunate of the world.

At church and in Church publications, I'm never made to feel guilty or fearful or frustrated. I only have feelings of being loved. I never feel like I'm being forced to "obey." In fact, I feel encouraged to be curious and creative. I feel we are being prepared by our leaders to move on to Fowler's Stage 5, as we are able to.

I like the openness and frankness with which our leaders deal with issues. All meeting minutes, for example, are open for anyone to review. It is heartening to know that our leaders trust us enough to share all the information they have, as well as the results of their deliberations; and that they always invite us to give input on important policy decisions. I get the sense that "collective inspiration" is valued.

At the heart of the matter, the main motive for me to stay is the overriding sense that Jesus is at the center of all we do; that Jesus is proud of us. I like the way we concentrate on learning to live Jesus' teachings. I really feel this is Jesus' work.

To close, I don't think of it as staying with "the" church; I think of it as staying with "my" church, or "our" church. I have such a feeling of belonging and being cherished. Why in the world wouldn't I stay? ☺

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the 33rd), 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. Copies of former columns are available at WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

2. D. Jeff Burton, "Why We Stay" (2008 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, August 2008, SL08231).

3. If we went back twenty-five years, my reasons then probably would have included: serving the needs of wife, children, parents; traditions; neighbors; the group; friends; callings; power; wanting to effect change; familiarity; fear of unknown/new; "maybe true," inertia; excitement of *Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, and Francis L. Menlove articles.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton,
djeffburton@gmail.com