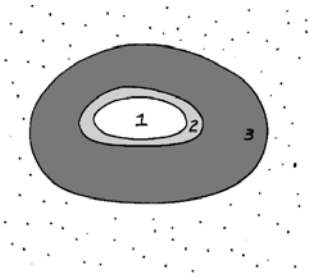


Braving the Borderlands

Bits and Pieces from the Inbox

Column 40 by D. Jeff Burton

June, 2011



The past few Borderlands columns have elicited some interesting comments from our readers, many of which are definitely worth sharing. I've changed names to shelter their identities. [Footnote 1]

Email from Barbara responding to recent columns about those struggling to “find a suitable mate” and those trying to manage relationship issues.

Barbara: When my husband and I began our relationship, he was a true believer. I was a convert who, though holding strong reservations about organized religion, felt drawn to the Church by its new and intellectually stimulating ideas. Our difference in perspectives has made for some heated and exciting debates that started during our dating years and have continued on through our marriage to date. But our differing outlooks have been a blessing instead of a stumbling block. Several things help us navigate these turbulent waters.

1. Richard Poll's talk about Liahona Saints and Iron Rod Saints helped us to agree that both approaches have their places in the search for truth, and that both should be respected.
2. We try to avoid letting our egos and pride get in the way. We don't try to prove the other person wrong. We respect each other's integrity.
3. We recognize that one person's gifts, spiritual and otherwise, are different from another's gifts. We acknowledge that each of us has strengths that can help us in our relationship.
4. Being trained in the sciences, we try to use the scientific method in our search for truth.

5. We observe how a principle is practiced by others, for example, in order to ascertain how effective it is. If the principle works for the good in the majority of cases, then we usually feel good about adopting it as well.
6. When we pray and get answers, we recognize that the answer is for the asker in particular, perhaps not for someone else. We allow the other the liberty of asking and receiving answers that make sense for him or her.
7. We recognize that the joy of life is in the journey, and that journeys are better with a companion. Life would be very boring if each of us thought exactly like the other.

Email from Darius: Thanks to you all for *Sunstone* magazine. I often read it cover to cover when it arrives. It gives me an alternative version--and more in-depth--of Mormonism that I don't get from the version offered through traditional Church channels. I wonder how many other versions of Mormonism I could conjure up if I put my mind to it? Perhaps you have already done it with your Borderlands diagram, at least four of them.

Are any of your writers or editors concerned about the possibility of being called on the carpet by the brethren for stepping too far out of the mainstream? Do you follow any guidelines in this respect?

Jeff: Glad you like the magazine. I think you are right that there are "many other versions" of Mormonism out there. Some may think we're in lock-step but my guess is that out of any two million active Mormons, you would find about two million active versions of Mormonism, each slightly (or significantly) different from the other. Think about your own ward members or even your own family. You have likely noticed that each has a differing view of what Mormonism is and what it requires of them. I have suggested in this column and in my books that each of us naturally develops a personal relationship with our Father in Heaven, and a personal religion. For most of us in the Borderlands, our personal religion is based on the fundamentals of Christianity and Mormonism. It's in our DNA, as they say.

As for following guidelines, yes, we at *Sunstone* follow some informal guidelines, e.g, responsible scholarship, honesty, no personal attacks, no criticism of Church leaders, doctrine or scripture, and so forth. What you see in *Sunstone* are mainly

comments on Mormon experience, policy and practice, especially as they affect the local scene and people in the wards and stakes, as my column does.

I haven't sensed much concern about "being called on the carpet." Church leaders likely have more important things to think about.

I've had no direct responses from the official Church to my Borderland columns. But I've been called in by my Stake Presidents a couple of times over the years to ask about things I have written. Those "call-ins" were supposedly of "local" origin but both Stake Presidents admitted that someone had called them from "downtown" to look into things. In the first incident, I was released from the Stake High Council. In the most recent case, the Stake President just seemed to be ascertaining my support of the Church. Kind of like a temple recommend interview. I left the meeting in good stead, I think. I have since served a mission. I do my home teaching every month and serve as our Ward's NEP Coordinator. But, I am considered (by me and by our ward members) to be on the fringes or in the borderlands of the Church. This status makes it harder for me to be close to other ward members, but I've seen that even true believers have that same difficulty. We may see our fellow ward members on Sunday for three hours, and get to know them through our callings, but we rarely know what's really going on "behind the front door" of most homes, or behind the foreheads of most ward members.

I have a new book, *Eternal Borderlands: Detours along the Road to Celestial Glory*, which describes some different kinds of members. You might find it interesting. [Footnote 2.]

Email from Travis, who with his wife, agonized for years over their relationship with the Church and their status as Borderlanders. His experience of moving into Group 3 status picks up here. This may be instructive for those contemplating leaving the Borderlands.

Travis: We'd leave the Ward parking lot each Sunday and either I or my wife would ask, "Why do we come? We don't belong here anymore."

We pondered the best way of dropping out for a long time, but nothing seemed feasible. The problem was solved when I became ill and couldn't go to church for several months. When I did go back I found I hadn't missed it a bit; I haven't been

back on a regular basis since then. That was two years ago. My wife still serves as a Family History Consultant and works one day each week in the Family History Center – other than that we're not really active anymore.

Our relationship with our children has not been affected much. Their love for us doesn't seem dependent on our level of activity in the church. Our son long ago moved to Group 3 and our youngest daughter is a frequent flyer between Groups 2 and 3. Our oldest daughter married a returned missionary who later became a bishop. She's an ex-Relief Society president who teaches seminary. She'll live happily ever after in Group 1. Our decision to leave activity hurt her, but she expresses her love and affection as freely as she did as a child.

Members of the ward have essentially shunned us with the exception of our home teacher. He'd be here in a minute if we needed him. Shortly after we explained to him why we dropped our activity, the bishopric came over. When we explained our situation to them, they seemed to take it personally, becoming defensive, then argumentative. That visit was followed by one from the stake folks, with a similar result.

We have no regrets about our decision so far. In fact we feel relieved. Towards the end, every time we went to church, it seemed as if we were walking up the down escalator. That tension is now gone from our lives. The only downside to our decision is the difficulty of finding ways to make Sunday spiritual and different from the other days. I'm a firm believer in keeping the Sabbath day holy.

What does my personal religion look like now? In his book, "On Being a Christian", Catholic theologian Hans Kung wrote that he doesn't consider himself to be a good Christian, however, he considers it a good thing to be a Christian. I guess that's where I'm at now – trying to figure out what it means for me to be a good Christian.

Email from Tim responding to Dustin's story in Column 37. While courting a girl, Dustin prayed and felt that God approved of them getting married. However, his girlfriend received the opposite answer. Dustin then expressed anger at God over the mix-up. [Footnote 2.]

Tim: We knew a young convert very well and took him into our home for a while. Our bishop eventually called him on a mission and then

encouraged him to go to BYU. There he met a pretty girl who had grown up a standard Mormon. They prayed for guidance, became engaged and a date was set.

Since he had no family in the church, our young man asked us to accompany him to the temple wedding. We traveled a few hundred miles to get there but after our arrival we noticed some strange goings-on that seemed to suggest trouble. That night at midnight he knocked on our motel door and told us he didn't think the marriage was going to come off, and sure enough it didn't.

He was broken-hearted, of course. She was confused about God's will for her and shortly thereafter went on a mission, telling people that that was what God had in mind for her all along. He continued at BYU and eventually met and married a talented, self-assured, competent girl with a beautiful spirit. She was just right for him and still is. So things worked out for him, despite what he thought God might have wanted for him earlier.

There isn't anything to absolutely guarantee that what we might think or assume is God's will is absolute and unchanging. Our human nature might be clouding the picture or warping our perceptions. Or maybe God is okay with several solutions to a problem.

Email from Ron: Though I miss some of the perks of being in Group 1, I count myself mostly in the Borderlands. I can't go back without changes, in me or in the church. What do you think would make it easier for us to move back into Group 1 status?

Jeff: That is a complex and very personal question. It would certainly make things easier if Group 1 members accepted Borderlanders as they are. And I agree that by accepting certain policy and practice changes, we could expand the borders to perhaps include many of us. I once compiled a list of "inspirations" I would broadcast to Mormons at the local level (if I were God) in hopes of preparing members for future policy and practice changes in the church. Here's a short sample of my wish list of "inspirations." (Add a dash of MSG to these, please):

1, Living a life based on Christian principles is as important as going to church meetings or temple attendance, and a religious life based on faith is equal to one based on testimony.

2. Instead of Cheerios, mothers may issue Mrs. Cavanaugh's chocolates to their children. (And also to those sitting nearby.)

3. It is okay for our leaders to expand temple covenants to include more Jesus-like behaviors such as "love," "kindness," "patience," "thoughtfulness," "sharing," "caring," "humility" and "honesty."

4. It could even become acceptable to open temple marriage ceremonies to immediate family members, whether they hold temple recommends or not.

5. We can expect to see fewer secrets. Secrets worth keeping are mainly those that protect the personal privacy of individual members.

6. Based on Inspiration No. 5, we may see more information being provided to members on, for example, how tithing money is spent, activity statistics, etc., even some negative information.

7. Likewise, church business meetings can generally be open to members, and minutes of such meetings may be made widely available.

8. Explanations of how routine policy decisions come about may be shared with members: Why, how and by whom such decisions are made. It is also okay to glean information and ideas from members before policy decisions are rendered.

9. It could be useful if ward and stake members had a hand in the selection their local leaders.

10. In some cases it may be okay to de-emphasize proselytizing missions and instead encourage youth to serve service-oriented missions.

11. It will okay if our leaders try letting members partially designate the destination of their tithing donations, e.g., "10% to mission work, 10% for humanitarian work, etc."

12. Church magazine articles for adults may soon offer "all sides of the issue" and without causing disastrous consequences.

13. Non-members who are expert in some religious topic may be invited to speak at Church meetings.

14. On some Sundays, it will be okay for the Bishopric and High Councilmen to sit with their children and their wives to sit on the stand.

15. It won't hurt if teachers are free to use any factual source of information that sheds accurate light on topics covered in classes.

Ron: Okay, maybe some of those could help. I see where you're coming from, I think. One more thought: It isn't only God who inspires people; people themselves sometimes inspire other people. But moving on, for Item 1, what "Christian Principles" are you talking about?

Jeff: I'm referring to the principles that guide the way we treat others. Once, for a home teaching lesson, I compiled a list of words that reflect "Christian traits and approaches for living." For me, these terms represent the attitudes and behaviors that mark one as a Christian Mormon. They suggest attributes that I associate with my understanding of Jesus. I try (with limited success, frankly) to choose one of these traits or attitudes each day, figure out what it means and how it can be applied in everyday life, and then try to use it as I deal with people during the day. For example, if the day's word is "caring," I might think as I drive my car, "How can I care for other people in those other cars on the road?" Then I might conclude, "I won't use my cell phone, I'll avoid competing with other drivers, and I'll drive 'carefully.'"

You might think of this approach as the "Borderlanders Game." You might also compile a personal list for yourself and give this Game a try. Then have your kids try the Game.

Here's my list. It helps to put the word "Is..." in front of the trait word, e.g., "Is accepting."

accepting
caring
a celebrator (of life)
charitable
chaste
clean
comforting
compassionate
concerned
contrite
courageous
a defender (of truth, the poor)
diligent
empathetic
equal
faithful
fair
forgiving

forthright
generous
gentle
honest
honorable
honors (e.g, parents)
humble
happy
helpful
hopeful
inclusive
(has) integrity
joyful
just
kind
liberal (as described in the Book of Mormon)
long suffering
loving
meek
merciful
obedient
open
patient
a peacemaker
pleasing
prayerful
sacrificing (self for others)
shares
temperate
thankful
thoughtful
tolerant
true
truthful
trusting
wise

Readers, what would you add to these two lists?
Send me an email at jeff@eburton.com.

Footnote 1. This is Column 40. Copies of past columns are available for free download at www.forthosewhowonder.com.

Footnote 2. Books were due to be available on amazon.com about July 10th. Check there to see a description of the book.