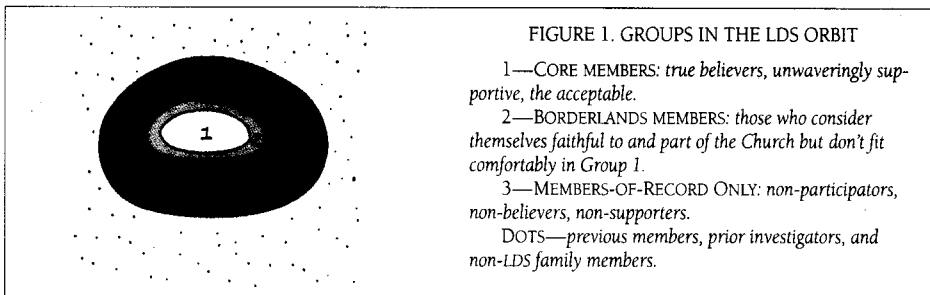


UNUSUAL TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

by D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, I share some unusual—and sometimes troubling—experiences and observations from four Borderlanders. I've changed the names of the first three. To respond, please send an email to jeff@eburton.com. I will forward your messages and may include some responses in a later column.¹

JACOB: Having been attracted to both men and women since my teens, I am what is sometimes referred to as a bisexual man. After a typical LDS upbringing, I went to BYU, met a wonderful woman, married in the temple, and fathered three children. We were all very active in the Church and, to all appearances, a standard Mormon family.

During all those years, I did not act on my attraction to men. But later, my work required me to travel overseas for extended periods. During these times away from home, I met and became attached to a man. One thing led to another, and we had sex.

I knew my actions were terribly wrong and sought counseling. Somehow my wife suspected that I might have stepped out on her. Although she knew no details—especially not that I had been involved with a man—she asked me about it directly. Bad as they were, I told her the facts. I said I would never commit the act again and was trying to repent for it. I asked for her forgiveness. I so wanted our marriage and family unit to survive; I was willing to do

whatever was needed.

Of course, my wife was stunned, hurt, betrayed, and furious. She sought counsel from friends, family, and the bishopric. Some, including one bishop's counselor, strongly urged her to divorce me, and she did. Ward members and neighbors soon knew the “sordid” details, and I was pushed into the Borderlands, where I still live. Everyone seemed to rally around my wife, but I felt little, if any, support from my ward leadership. I was the expendable one, the throw-away.

I hoped that if I fully cooperated in the divorce proceedings, went through the Church's repentance process, and showed my wife that I loved her and our children, she might in time change her mind and be willing to reestablish our eternal family. She stayed in the family home, and I moved out of the stake. I've been very attentive to my family's needs, paying child support and trying to spend as much time with them as possible. I even tried to go to church with my kids, but met many objections from local Church leaders and others.

I completed the Church's repentance process of excommunication and rebaptism. I am celibate to this day and observe all Church teachings, except that I am in arrears on my tithing. Key to my continuing efforts is my desire to see my sealing with my ex-wife preserved, and I hope progress can still be made in healing our family, even if in the afterlife.

The years have passed, but my hopes

have not been realized. My wife has married again; our children have grown. I feel completely rejected, and one of my children still perceives me as very suspect.

When I asked priesthood leaders if we were still sealed, they told me yes—that unless there had been a cancellation, the sealing was still in place, though subject to my ex-wife's future wishes. However, when my wife asked her leaders the same question, they said no—because I had been excommunicated, we were not sealed. I asked my current stake president (a good man) for clarification and was told that both answers were right, but I needed to have my blessings “fully restored” in order for the sealing to be valid. Because of financial problems, I have not been a full tithing payer. Thus, I couldn't get all my blessings back yet. I asked if he would be willing to help with a posthumous restoration of blessings should I die before I could catch up on my tithing. At first, because I was not current on tithes, he said “no,” but later he said he would do it.

What upsets me most is the seeming willingness of the local ward and stake leadership to see my family and me sacrificed, first on the altar of their biases, and later on the altar of money (I must “pay for blessings”). Everyone has seemed to ignore my desire to keep my family together and to heal my past sins. This whole episode has not drawn me closer to the Church nor back to Group 1. Indeed, it has made me feel that Church membership is all about money and control, not about helping individuals and family.

What have others experienced along these lines? Any suggestions?

JEFF: Thanks for sharing your story with our readers. Let's see what responses this column generates.

MARY: I have been married for ten happy years to an inactive Mormon from a very active LDS family. I am not an LDS Church member, nor is my family of origin.

I think that the LDS Church provides good structure and programs for children and families and promotes a healthy lifestyle. It also seems to provide teachings on how to be a good Christian during this lifetime, maybe even better teachings than other Christian religions offer. As a whole, I think very highly of the LDS people I've met or known.

We have two children, ages five and

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

eight. My husband would love for all of us to join up and be active in the LDS Church together. Unfortunately over the years, I have read things about Church doctrines and teachings that have raised serious issues. I am also bugged by Mormons bearing their testimonies to me. They seem to do it more for their benefit than mine, as if trying to reaffirm their own beliefs instead of imparting any spiritual information to me. These testimony-bearing incidents usually happen when I ask a question about some LDS doctrine or teaching. It's frustrating because I'm only looking for information.

I'm trying to determine if I can take part in the LDS experience for the sake of my husband and children. Can I go to church, participate in family home evenings, get involved in the activities, but not fully accept the doctrine or Church proceedings?

From reading your columns, I note that others have felt the way I do now. The various approaches you suggest others use to deal with these problems address many of my concerns, and reading them gives me hope.

JEFF: I think you can find suitable ways of integrating yourself into your husband's and children's Mormonism. Just do what feels comfortable and allows you to be honest. Go as far as you can with that fuel. Time will likely expand your horizons. An initial approach might be to simply tell members, "I am not a true believer, but I want to participate in church with my husband and children. So I'll use the doctrines and practices that work for me. Is that okay with you?"

As for the doctrines, teachings, and unique LDS practices you are not able to accept yet, you might simply ignore the doctrine and theology and instead concentrate on the human, the now, the good, the opportunities for service, and your family's needs.

MARY (sometime later): Well, we have started attending church with our kids. Depending on the day's topic in the Gospel Principles class, it can be a bit of a challenge for me to sit and listen to doctrine I don't necessarily believe—or in Mormonese, doctrine I don't have a testimony of. I barely made it through the "Final Judgment" lesson last week and am not looking forward to "Exaltation" next week. From what I've read, it outlines each commandment and doctrine a person is required to adhere to.

I have to come to terms with trying to fit

into a religion that withholds blessings from those who don't adhere to its doctrines, teachings, and commandments. I would be happier if these religious activities were a source of comfort for me, and a refuge from the world at large. But I realize that won't happen unless I am fully converted.

Our kids are doing okay at church, but they are starting to realize that, as a family, we don't follow all the "rules."

For now I'll have to remain a fence-sitter, which may get more uncomfortable as time goes on. So I'll work on trying to get comfortable up there. Perhaps a large cushion might help.

JEFF: Any suggestions from our readers on how to pump up Mary's cushion?

OLIVER: While a teenager in the eastern United States, I converted to the Church. Then I went on a mission, and married an LDS woman. Now, in my early thirties, I'm a relatively new subscriber to *SUNSTONE*. I recently read your column, "Protecting and Strengthening Your Marriage," and found it very interesting and useful. Who developed the "Groups in the LDS Orbit" model? How is it supposed to be interpreted?

JEFF: I call that model the "fried egg." The yolk represents core members; the egg white is a group of "members of record

only," and a fairly thin membrane between the two is where Borderlanders are located. The reasons people find themselves between the core group and the non-participating group vary. Most of us understand that if five hundred Mormons are sitting in a chapel, five hundred different versions of Mormonism will be represented. The differences are often small and unspoken but can sometimes be quite large. Thus, the "fried egg" model doesn't always fit every person's situation. Where would you place yourself in that simplified model?

OLIVER: That is difficult to explain. Maybe a little background will help.

My perception is that Mormon pioneers had a raw "fire in the belly" that brought them close together, despite their diverse set of personalities and backgrounds. They had a sense of mission which I am sure was intensified by the newness of the Church and the persecution it endured. There was a feeling of fellowship and an attitude of working together for a common goal.

I don't feel that kind of fellowship in our ward and stake. On the whole, Church members have done well in our society, creating a kind of cultural security blanket. So fellowship or togetherness seems to be built on socializing instead of on mission. (I may sound cynical but don't necessarily mean to be.) Fellowship seems to be all about the board-game nights, the dances, dinners and parties, the BYU bond, and other socializing behaviors, some of which I openly

criticize (at least with my wife and non-member friends). My church experience hasn't provided me a strong sense of mission and Christian service.

Many born and raised in the Church may know only that socializing foundation—that “weak fellowship” culture. If so, how will they work their way to a spiritual conversion and find a sense of mission? I'm worried that this kind of conversion happens only rarely among this population.

So, I suppose I do find myself somewhere outside the yolk. As a convert, I've retained a religious past which was centered on service and work. My wife and I sometimes skip Church social events to engage in public service efforts. Sometimes ward members in the “yolk” perceive us as being inactive, or at least disconnected from the CTR track.

A better “yolk” (a purer one, in my view) would be one in which this “inward comfort” is changed to a focus on getting out to mingle with, work with, and give Christian service to non-members.

I don't mean all this as criticism . . . well, maybe I do.

JEFF: Thanks for your story. This is another facet of living in the Borderlands that we haven't dealt with much in the column. So, readers, please respond.

BRAD [his real name]: I grew up in Idaho, served a mission, and then began a seven-year stint at BYU, finishing a biology degree, then an MPA and a JD. For six of those seven years, I was very happy and felt I fit in just fine. I won intramural championships, took extra classes in several disciplines, dated like crazy, served in elders quorums, led student service organizations, attended devotionals, and worked as a teaching assistant. However, instead of rich and rewarding BYU activities, my final year has been filled with anxiety and loss.

I love to exercise my mind by evaluating issues I care about, such as happiness, personhood, epistemology, equality, governance, decision-making, and bioethics. Last year I became interested in homosexuality, a topic that, because I'm completely heterosexual, had never really been on my radar. I'm a binge learner, and once I started on this topic, I couldn't stop researching. I became a teaching assistant for a bioethics class where readings and discussion on homosexuality constitute one week of the curriculum. The moral gravity of LDS ho-

mosexual issues grabbed me, and I gathered a lot of data. I decided to summarize the subject in a book, and over a three-week period, the book seemed to come through me. In short, I felt inspired. I began to sell the initial book to libraries and bookstores (it sold out at the BYU bookstore). Now I am seeking a publisher.

Distributing my book had its costs. Soon after I completed the first draft, my mainstream LDS girlfriend decided we needed to separate. The MPA program declined to nominate me for the presidential management fellow program, a nomination I had been counting on and working toward for years. My parents were upset; my bishop called me into his office several times; deans at BYU's Law School wanted to “warn” me. Nevertheless, I persisted. And every day I feared BYU would block me from graduating.

I attended the Sunstone Symposium last summer and have subsequently read extensively in the Mormon blogosphere. I feel there is an undercurrent of people who could help the Church transition to a more democratic, less hierarchical, less fundamentalist culture. There is far too much richness inside and outside the Church to justify the kind of limited worldview I spent about a quarter century immersed in. I'm hoping that this undercurrent will grow with the rise of my generation and its successor.

JEFF: What a story. Thanks for being open and sharing your thoughts. You are one of the few Borderlanders who have been able or willing to “come out” in the column with your real identity. Readers: Any thoughts for Brad?²

NOTES

1. All past columns are available for download at www.forthosewhowonder.com. This is column 41.

2. At the August Sunstone Symposium at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, Brad Carmack chaired session UT11315, concerning issues related to gays and gay marriage. He also presented a paper “Why Mormonism Can Abide Gay Marriage,” UT11342. At the same symposium, I chaired session UT11122 about Borderland experiences.

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

*D. Jeff Burton,
djeffburton@gmail.com*