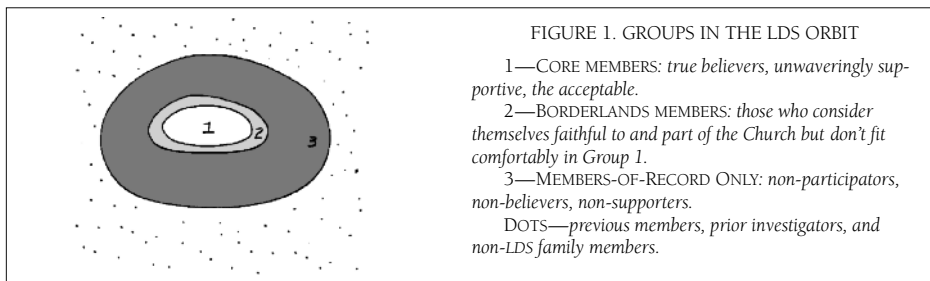


## BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

BORDERLANDERS SHARE  
THEIR COPING MECHANISMS

by D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN PRESENTS several readers' answers to the frequently asked question, "How can I cope as a member of the Borderlands?" I have edited their comments for clarity and brevity; I have also changed their names.<sup>1</sup>

FROM DENNY: What helps me to cope is to be a "verifier;" never a true doubter or a true believer in anything—including Mormonism. To verify can mean proving, confirming, substantiating, certifying, documenting, and validating, depending on the issue or claim. My approach follows the old cold-war axiom, "trust but verify," and conforms to Proverbs 4:7: "Wisdom is the principle thing; therefore, get wisdom, and with thy getting, get understanding." I interpret wisdom to mean rationality, sound judgment, and common sense. I interpret understanding to mean reason, cognition, and insight. Intellect brings all the particulars in wisdom and understanding beneath one umbrella. These traits, rather than simple doubt and belief, are supportive of my borderlander temperament and predisposition.

I seem to have been inclined toward this kind of hopeful pragmatism from an early age. I began reading the 12-volume set *Bible Stories for Children* when I was about six years old. The books were beautifully illustrated, engagingly portrayed, and often stimulated my young mind with small-fry inquisitiveness. I don't recall that I accepted any story or parable—or its subsequent

moral point—as self-evident. Rather, I probed, prodded, and wondered about everything, spending much time meandering pensively around our small farm in southwest Utah. I was given the dubious nick name of "Dennis the Menace" because of my endless inquisitiveness. (I also had red hair and freckles, which fit well with moniker.)

D&C 88:93 and 2 Nephi 2:13 provide guidance for me as a borderlander: "For it is given to man that he should act for himself in seeking intelligence, or the light of truth, which light is in all things, gives life to things, is the law by which all things are governed, and which enlightens and quickens your understandings."

FROM CATHLEEN: I want to give you a different slant on coping with the "Borderlands" as I have experienced it.

I was once asked to be on a panel considering the question of whether to stay active in the Church. I can't remember exactly what I said, but it was something like, "Being active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is quite different from being active in the *gospel* of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." This approach to "activity" guides all my actions as a member of the Borderlands and has made my association with Mormonism easier to justify.

If our goal is to be active in the *gospel*, then some members in the middle of your borderland circle (those in Group 1) would more accurately be defined as "borderlan-

ders." Though you define them as the "true believers," you don't specify what they believe in. But you are right that they are more acceptable to Church leaders.

For me, some of the people you define as borderlanders are closer to living the full gospel than are some traditionally active members. Those who have moved closer to the *fullness* of the gospel of Jesus Christ should be closer to the middle of your circle, don't you think? Who are the true "true believers?"

The point here is that it is easier for me to cope with my borderland status when I expand my devotions beyond the Church to encompass a fuller definition of what Jesus would have us do. And I also consider myself to be acceptable to Jesus and God.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about: The first time I went to the temple was on my wedding day. I was seriously in love, and pretty giddy, but I tried very hard to absorb all that was happening during the endowment ceremony—and to remember my part of the ritual. My mother, who was sitting next to me, kept making excuses for the ceremony rather than explaining it—which only confused me. The rituals made me somewhat uncomfortable; they felt cold, impersonal, and even pagan to my innocent brain.

Later, I realized that Mother didn't explain anything mainly because she didn't understand what was going on, either. To attend the temple regularly and to not understand or question any of it was just part of the temple experience for her. In her mind, we are forbidden to speak about any part of the endowment outside the temple, and thus, it remains mysterious and inscrutable.

But I'm different. I need to understand what I am doing and why I am doing it. So, in spite of warnings not to delve into the mysteries, I searched for meaning in the temple rites, and after much digging actually found them to be plain, simple, beautiful, and freeing. To me, the symbolism in the endowment ceremony offers profound insights into the possibilities available for our personal development and progress.

This "searching for meaning" attitude is another coping mechanism that I find useful and rewarding. It helped keep me in the Church.

FROM ROBERT: I had an interesting experience a few months ago. My elder's quorum president said that if anyone in the classroom wouldn't commit to praying and reading scriptures daily they should raise their

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hand now. In the past I probably would not have raised my hand, telling myself that I was only committing to three days, since he hadn't specified a duration, and that I would carry it out by reading only one word per day. But such bold challenges, I have found, make me less—not more—likely to read and pray daily. So I raised my hand. I was the only one who did, of course, and many of my brethren took it as a joke. It wasn't. A few weeks later, when the quorum president sat down with me to discuss home teaching, I told him my concerns about his challenge and why I felt compelled to embarrass myself in the way I had. We had a positive and productive conversation. Hopefully he'll learn not to put people on the spot like that in the future. I was pleased that my honest approach seemed to bear some fruit.

Shortly thereafter, I was invited with a few other elders in my age category to begin attending the high priests group. The group leader is a longtime friend and I told him about the hand-raising incident in elder's quorum. He told me that I would find the high priests group to be different, since most high priests "have had time to mellow." And yes, I have found this to be true. So my coping mechanisms now include trying to be honest and trying to associate with more tolerant people. Like myself, of course.

FROM KEN: I enjoy your Borderland articles in SUNSTONE. I can easily identify with the people you describe. I grew up LDS and did the regular things including going on a mission, graduating from BYU, getting married in the temple, being active in the Church, and so forth. I'm now a retired professor recently relocated to Payson, Utah. Here are the answers to your Borderlands questionnaire to show how I've coped.

1. *How would you describe your upbringing in the Church?* I grew up an active Mormon in Provo, Utah, though my parents varied in their church activity. In the 1960's I got an AB degree from BYU in biology (biological evolution was assumed in the department at that time). I also went on a German-speaking mission for the Church. My wife and I were active during the five years I spent getting a Ph.D. in biology from Yale University. During a three-year postdoctoral fellowship in California, we attended Mormon meetings but I was beginning to move into the borderlands. For example, I wrote a letter to President McKay about the Church's position on evo-

lution (re: Joseph Fielding Smith's writings) and he answered that the Church had no official position on evolution, which was reassuring. During my subsequent years of university work, I continued to attend LDS meetings with my family, but gradually lost my ability to believe in the divine aspects of the LDS Church (as well as those of any other church).

2. *What is your current status in the Church?* I'm a "secular" Mormon. No temple recommend. I'm in the ward choir.

3. *What issues / events / actions / concerns caused you to move into (or through) the borderlands? (Using the three-stage "egg" model of the Borderlands column.)* My many problems include that I'm troubled with the thousands of gods that have been worshiped by humans down through the ages. I believe in evolution and think it explains most of the life I see around me, and I feel I have a right to be what I am, not what someone says I should be.

4. *Why do / did you stay in the borderlands as opposed to moving on past them into inactivity or leaving the Church?* The Church has been wonderful for our family (three of our four children and their families are still active). I like the Church and wish it well. I enjoy the people at church meetings, and don't feel any need to dissuade them from their convictions.

5. *How did / does this situation effect you (emotionally / spiritually / physically?)* I can't really say there has been a negative emotional, spiritual, or physical effect.

6. *How did / do you cope with those issues / events / concerns / status?* I just don't let these issues and differences bother me much. My coping mechanism is to accept others as they are—and hopefully be accepted—but recognize that it won't always happen. I try to maintain a sense of humor about the situation.

7. *How well do / did you cope?* I do well.

8a. *How open and honest are you with others about your situation, or about your borderland-causing issues / events / actions / concerns?* My wife and family know that I don't amount to much spiritually. Same for most of the church members I have regular contact with. I mind my own business and don't push them, so they mostly put up with me.

8b. *If you have kept your borderland status a secret, please explain why you felt a need to do that.* It has not been a secret, although I don't push it at people.

8c. *What would it take for you to be honest and open with others?* I don't think I'm dishonest, and I don't feel any need to "ex-

plain" everything.

9. *How did / does this borderlands experience effect your family / spouse / children / parents / friends?* They put up with me, and are happy I still attend church. My wife, however, fears that we may not have a wonderful future in the spiritual kingdom after we die.


10. *How have these various people (e.g., spouse, ward members, children, friends) responded to you and your experience?* They know I don't have much to offer from a spiritual point of view, but they seem to like me and put up with me.

11. *To what actions / behaviors / attitudes / approaches do you attribute to your success as a borderlander? (If this applies to you.)* I don't dislike family or friends who are trying to be good Mormons. I wish them well, and feel they have a right to be what they are, as I am what I am. (I'm living by my DNA, as they must live by theirs).

12. *To what actions / behaviors / attitudes / approaches do you attribute to your lack of success as a "borderlander?" (If this applies to you.)* I haven't felt any particular lack.

13. *What else do you think we need to know?* Right now I can't think of anything that would be useful.

THANKS to these four generous people who were willing to share their stories about how they cope or have coped with their borderland status. As you can see, each person has developed a different approach that works for him or her. And in every case, these coping skills have taken time to cultivate and perfect.<sup>2</sup>

I am looking for more Borderland stories. Ken's story follows my standard questionnaire. If you would like to share your story, successful or not, or to solicit help with coping, please use that format and send an email to me at [jeff@eburton.com](mailto:jeff@eburton.com). 

## NOTES

1. In my first column (this is Column 46), 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. All columns are available for free download at [www.forthosewhowonder.com](http://www.forthosewhowonder.com).

2. My book, *For Those Who Wonder*, contains several chapters on coping with borderland issues and problems. It is a free download at [www.forthosewhowonder.com](http://www.forthosewhowonder.com).