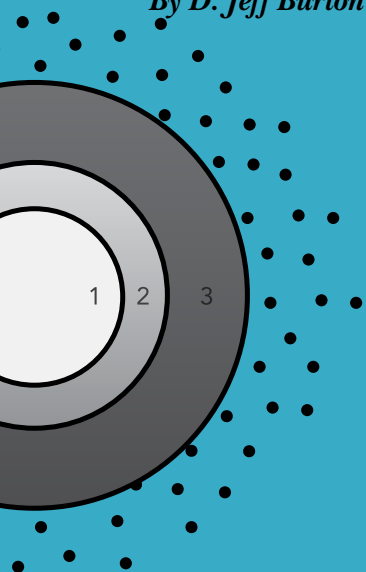


ARE THE BORDERS SHIFTING?

By D. Jeff Burton



MEMBERSHIP GROUPS

- 1 - **CORE MEMBERS:** True believers; unwaveringly supportive; the acceptable.
 - 2 - **BORDERLANDS MEMBERS:** Those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but who don't fit comfortably in Group 1.
 - 3 - **MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY:** Non-participators, non-believers, non-supporters.
- DOTS:** Previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

IN THE EGG-LIKE image we use to illustrate the three types of Church membership, a Borderland member is one who, for various reasons, does not fit comfortably within the borders of Group 1 but has not yet migrated into Group 3.¹

From the beginning I have said that, in addition to helping those in the Borderlands to feel at peace with themselves and to find suitable ways of dealing with their Borderland status, one of this column's long-term goals was to see the borders expanded so that Group 2 would eventually be included in Group 1: the "acceptable."

Two recent general conference talks, one by Elder Holland and the other by President Uchtdorf, seem to suggest the possibility that this day has finally come, at least for those whose Borderland status is the result of excessive curiosity, skepticism,

questioning, and doubting. (Those with same-sex marriage desires, mother-in-heaven causes, priesthood-for-women issues, or other Church policy concerns, still seem well beyond the borders of Group 1 status.)

Here are some pertinent quotes:

DIETER F. UCHTDORF

- "Some [members] struggle with unanswered questions."
- "A question that creates doubt . . . can, after careful investigation, build faith. . . The acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding"

- “Sometimes there is a difference of opinion as to what the ‘facts’ really mean.”
- “To those of you who have separated [your-selves] from the Church, I say, my dear friends, there is yet a place for you. Come and add your talents, gifts and energies to ours. We will all become better as a result.”
- “If you could look into our hearts, you would probably find that you fit in better than you suppose. . . . We have yearnings and struggles and hopes similar to yours.”
- “Some might ask, ‘But what about my doubts?’ It is natural to have questions. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions.”
- “One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith, even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty.”
- “Doubt your doubts. [Don’t] allow doubt to hold [you] prisoner and keep [you] from the divine love, peace and gifts that come through faith. . . .”²

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

- “Honestly acknowledge your questions and concerns, but first and forever fan the flame of your faith.”
- “When doubt or difficulty comes, do not be afraid to ask for help.”³

Words similar to these have been used in this column on many occasions over the past decade.

DURING the past few months, I have spoken to a number of people, via email and in person, about these recent utterances and the questions they have raised. Here are three of the conversations. They have been edited for brevity and clarity. The questioners’ names have been changed.

JOHN: So what does this all mean for the issue of testimony? For example, where does it leave me in my (so far futile) quest for a testimony of the Book of Mormon?

JEFF: Keep in mind that, in Mormon parlance, “testimony” has a unique and fluid definition, especially when compared to its definition in legal contexts (where a testimony must follow strict rules of evidence). For example, I know several people for whom “testimony” means the complete absence of any questions or doubts about some LDS claim. For others it means a “sure knowledge” but one that is strictly “given by the Spirit.” For still others, a testimony is simply a willingness to go along with a claim or an instruction. Less often, we come across those who insist on natural and scientific proof before they are willing to bear “testimony.”

I sometimes listen to the variations people include in their testimony bearing. For example, some say, “I know . . .” Others say, “I have a testimony that . . .” Still others say, “I have a firm belief in . . .” Then others stand and say, “I know in my heart that . . .” These subtle variations lead me to wonder what kind and depth of evidence the bearer is relying on, how much of it is based on physical, observable data, how much of it is a “burning in the bosom,” and even what the source of that testimony was. A voice of authority? An answer to prayer? Being an actual eye witness? Scientific or historical data?

Further, we have to untangle the word testimony from similar terms like faith, belief, and knowledge. A Mormon “testimony” has often been associated with “knowledge” but can an expression of “having faith” now count as a testimony? Reading Elder Holland’s and President Uchtdorf’s recent messages leaves me with the impression that it can.

So, I guess you would have to define what you mean by “having” or “bearing” your testimony. Sometimes being vague is the safest and kindest way of talking with others about the issue (while not being dishonest, of course). It might also help to simply ask how others are defining their testimonies.

Another approach is to compartmentalize your testimony by creating categories of significance for each item of your religious beliefs or points of faith. For example:

- Those things I know from hard data and/or highly significant evidence: “I know that Joseph Smith was born in 1805.” “The earth orbits the sun.” “The location of Kolob has not been determined.



- Those things I know because it came from a trusted voice: “My mom told me God would answer my prayers.” “President David O. McKay said we are all children of a loving Heavenly Father.”
- Those things I know from actual personal experience: “I found out for myself that loving others is a good thing to do.” “Mom was right about God answering my prayers, at least on certain occasions.” “Jesus’s teachings have helped me live a happier life.”
- Those things I have enough evidence or reasoning to have generated some belief, but do not yet know: “The Godhead is made up of three actual persons.” “I have a Mother in Heaven.”
- Those things that I don’t know but which I am willing to accept on faith: “Jesus is my personal Savior.” “It benefits me to pay tithing.” “We all lived on or near Kolob during the pre-existence.”
- Those things I am yet unsure of, but about which I am currently studying and gathering data: “Joseph Smith actually translated the Book of Mormon into English from a genuine ancient language called Reformed Egyptian pressed into soft golden sheets of metal.” “God gave us commandments to ensure we live the happiest life possible.”
- Those things that are not important to me: “Brigham Young taught the Adam-God theory.” “Jesus visited the Nephites in the Western Hemisphere in 33 C.E.” “Kolob exists.”
- All others, NEC (yet).

You can create your own list of compartments and then keep a written record of your levels of belief/knowledge/acceptance/faith in the various issues and claims of concern to you. These will change, of course, as the evidence for or against a claim/policy/concern/issue builds and matures, or crumbles and falls, and as your items of concern or interest change.

So, to answer your question, I believe the acceptable definition of “having a testimony” has broadened and allows us to be more flexible when, for example, we try to obtain a temple recommend.

ALLEN: When I mentioned President Uchtdorf’s talk to my el-

der’s quorum president, he responded with, “Yeah, doubt your doubts. Good advice” (for people like me). He didn’t seem to have heard anything else. He seems to see the talk as telling members that “doubt is bad and should be ignored.” How should I deal with people like this?

JEFF: Certainly, there are some doubts which, if ignored, could enhance your life and those around you (e.g., doubting that God loves you and wants only the best for you and your family). However, I don’t think President Uchtdorf’s intent was to simply dismiss doubt as a troublesome impediment to gaining perfection.

I think it might have meant, “doubt the *sources* of your doubts.” Many detractors and nay-sayers are using data and information sources that are suspect. Be as skeptical about the validity of negative information as you are about positive claims and official history.

President Uchtdorf, as well as other authorities, recognize that unanswered doubts have led to the departure of millions of Mormons from the Church over the decades and that the phenomenon of doubting has greatly increased since the advent of the Internet with its ability to bring knowledge—good and bad, accurate and questionable—into so many minds.

When a staunch member gets fixated on the “doubt your doubts” phrase, you could respond with, “Yes, it is also very interesting that President Uchtdorf said, ‘There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions.’ Just out of curiosity, what have you questioned or doubted during your lifetime?” If he or she looks shocked or offended, follow that up with, “And how did you deal with your doubts?”

Up until recently it has not be proper to openly acknowledge questions and doubts. But it seems that the gates are now open and that we are all being invited to walk through. We can and should ask questions and acknowledge our struggles. It can be faith promoting for all concerned if handled with tact and Christian love.

MARTHA: Elder Holland suggests “honestly acknowledging your questions and concerns” and “asking for help.” Whom should we be honest with, and to whom can we safely turn to for help? I can’t imagine being really honest with most of the members of my ward, and I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking my bishop for help.

JEFF: When considering who to talk with, I usually suggest constructing concentric circles with you in the center circle. In the first circle might be your spouse, your kids, your parents, and maybe a counselor. The next circle could be your close friends and relatives. The next circle might include ward members, neighbors, and so forth. Start with the people in the closest circle and evaluate how much each of them already knows, how much you think they need to know, and how to go about sharing your story with them. For example, a spouse is usually the first who should know the honest truth, but circumstances are always unique.

As for asking for help, a similar tactic may help. Many who are in the deep closet (almost no one knows of their plight) will often find a professional counselor helpful at first. And then a loving and understanding spouse can provide more help and comfort. (See our previous three columns for examples). If you can identify a fellow-traveler, someone also in the Borderlands, he or she can often provide helpful suggestions and support.

To close this column, though it seems to me that we in the “questioning, doubting, unsure” section of the Borderlands are in the process of being incorporated into Group 1, it’s important to remember that things spoken from the “Salt Lake pulpit” often take time to make their way to the local pulpit. None of us easily give up engrained ideas, beliefs, prejudices, and biases. It takes time. It will take work for a staunch believer to believe and act like the “Jack Mormon” of yesterday is a “fellow Saint” today. So give your ward members a few years to catch up with the general leadership. Help them, as you see the opportunity, by being honest and forthright about your situation, and by helping others who are now traveling the path you have trod before them.

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is Column 50), 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. My book, *For Those Who Wonder*, and all of the Borderland columns are available for free download at: www.forthosenhower.com.

2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” October 2013 General Conference, <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng> (accessed 13 January 2014).

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” October 2013 General Conference, <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/like-a-broken-vessel?lang=eng> (accessed 13 January 2014).

On My Return to Utah

The women,
a small band of three,
welcome me.

Talk of children and responsibilities.
“Is there anything we can do to help?”
I shake my head and see relief.

“Are you staying?”
Eyes speak approval of
the stable husband,
who is coming still.

The weathered corral gate swings open.
“Are you glad to get back to Utah?”
Wary, I shy.

I ask about them—gardens, homes, families.
Born and raised in Utah.
No interest in the Outland I have come from

Silently evaluating experience and muscle.
Can she pull a plow or
does she live in the racing stable?
Is she a fence jumper?
Their eyes consider.

I see strong heritage stock,
predictable,
breeding lines carefully traced.

And long for my wild
unknowable mustangs
with the hard hooves.

LORRAINE JEFFERY