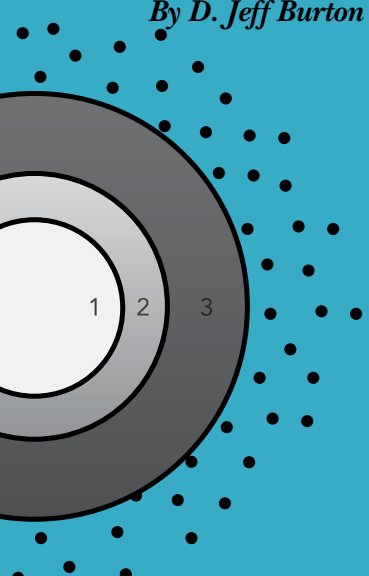


A SUCCESSFUL BORDERLADER'S STORY

By D. Jeff Burton

MEMBERSHIP GROUPS

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- 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 THIS COLUMN, I relate the story of a Borderlander through edited emails we exchanged over a few months. Trevor (not his real name) seems to be making his Borderland status into a positive life experience. His approaches and thoughts may be attractive to readers of this column who are trying to make Mormonism work for them.¹

TREVOR: I work full-time as a research consultant for a large government agency. I served a mission in Florida in the mid-2000's, and I'm single (but looking). I'm glad I've discovered SUNSTONE and your Borderlands columns because, basically, my traditional testimony completely disappeared during the past few years.

My journey started when I read *Rough Stone Rolling* by Richard Bushman. Since then I've explored some of the main issues related to Church history, specifically surrounding Joseph Smith, his polygamy experiences, and inconsistencies in the Church's traditional founding story.

I have one good friend who knows all about my situation and

he's been a lot of help. My experience has shaken his traditional testimony a little, too, but he is kind of a natural Borderlander anyway. I haven't found many others I thought I could talk openly with.

I try to date, but most of the girls I know are in Group 1, and I fear that most would run away when they find out I don't have a "knowing" testimony. I still want to get married in the temple—is that weird? If you come across any single female Borderlanders about my age (I'm 28), have them contact me.²

I'm currently the elders quorum president in my singles ward which has been a difficult situation at times. When I told the bishop about my status he was great about it. There were times when I wished he would release me, I even hinted at it once, but he wouldn't do it!

So, my parents, bishop, sister, and one friend now know about my doubts. Some of the savvy brethren in elders quorum might have picked up on it, too, since I have told them to reach out to me if they were struggling with their testimonies. My parents recognize that my doubts have come not because I want an excuse to live

differently but because I care a lot about the Church and have done my homework. I feel they respect my honest inquiry into Church history and my desire to be true to myself with these discoveries.

I'm aware that there are other Borderlanders out there but I don't know any personally, and often feel trapped. I read about other Borderlanders and listen to their podcasts but I can't tell if any people around me disbelieve to the degree that I do.

JEFF: By nature, and often necessity, many Borderlanders are partly, or even completely, in the closet. That is why it is as difficult for you to identify them as it is for them to identify you. It takes time and effort to get to the point where you can be open and honest with various people.³ So be patient. Most "Borderlanders" stay because of forces beyond simple testimony. Some have spouses and families to consider, others have jobs that could be affected, others simply love the Church and their place in it and don't want to give it up.

TREVOR: While reading Church history, I started detecting what seemed to be a pattern of deception in Joseph's behavior. Do you think it's okay that, with these views, I'm elders quorum president?

JEFF: I've long ago stopped trying to figure Joseph Smith out. No one can know exactly what was going on in his brain. But we live in a Church originated by him and fleshed out by Brigham Young and later leaders. We can accept what we want and leave some of the other things aside. For example, many of us concentrate more on Jesus and what he taught than on Joseph Smith. You can continue to be the elders quorum president if you enjoy the calling and if people like the job you are doing.

TREVOR: Thank you for the reply. And thank you for column 50 ("Are the Borders Shifting?").⁴ I agree that Uchtdorf and Holland's conference talks did suggest that Group 1 is slowly becoming more accepting of Group 2 Borderlanders. I could not have read it at a more opportune time because it was the week I was teaching the elders quorum. I actually shared some of the quotes you cited from Pres. Uchtdorf's conference talk. I was able to teach from the heart and be honest about my testimony while not scaring anybody. I was proud to quote Pres. Uchtdorf when he said:

None of us is quite as Christ-like as we know we should be. But we earnestly desire to overcome our faults and the tendency to

sin. With our heart and soul we yearn to become better with the help of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. If these are your desires, then regardless of your circumstances, your personal history, or the strength of your testimony, there is room for you in this Church. Come, join with us!

To me, this statement was *huge!* I had been wondering if it made sense for me to be a part of the Church with my limited testimony that only extended to believing in God and wanting to live a good life. I'm so glad the Church seems to be more accepting of those who don't have traditional testimonies.

JEFF: Certainly, President Uchtdorf's messages (including the one you quote above) give great hope that the Church is broadening. It's unfortunate that so many at the local level have interpreted the "strait and narrow path" as meaning that only select, acceptable people can fit on it, walking lockstep and in single file, it seems. But another interpretation of those words is "direct and reliable." Perhaps a better image is a group of people helping each other along the road, moving together in harmony and love towards life.

TREVOR: Is it common for Borderlanders to not believe Joseph's claims, his "First Vision" accounts, or the historicity of the Book of Mormon?

JEFF: I would say that it is not that unusual. I think most professional historians, LDS and non-LDS alike, have discounted the traditional stories and claims about the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Even the Church has backed away from some of the traditional claims that all American Indians are descendants of Lehi, as well as the idea that the Nephites and Lamanities inhabited the whole western hemisphere. Missionaries in Central and South America no longer tell prospective members that they are "in the lineage of a chosen people."

Each person needs to examine the claims made by Joseph Smith (and the claims others made in his name) to determine how important each one is to him/her. For example, I don't care which of Joseph Smith's versions of the First Vision claim is "correct." The truthfulness of one version or another doesn't affect me in my daily life; I'm more worried about taking care of my parents, making an honest living, keeping harmony in the family, getting my lesson



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ready for class next week, avoiding traffic accidents, managing my blood pressure, and so forth. I think it's healthiest for Borderlanders to concentrate on the here and now, rather than on past events and claims (though there are exceptions).

I would like to share your developing success story with our readers. Could you provide a little more personal information? I have a questionnaire that helps us understand you better.

1. How would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

Both my parents were active and brought all of us kids to church. There are three boys and one girl in my family. Two of us are currently active at ages 28 (me) and 24 (my sister).

2. What is your current status in the church?

My temple recommend expires in a couple of months and the upcoming interview could be interesting. I'll be using your advice on how to deal with interviews.

3. What issues caused you to move into the "Borderlands?"

Church history. [See Trevor's comments above.]

4. Why did you stay in the "Borderlands" as opposed to moving on?

I love the Church and still find God through my participation. I don't discount the powerful spiritual experiences I've had while reading the Book of Mormon and participating in church. When I participate and have faith (even if my belief is limited) I am happier. There are also strong cultural reasons to stay since most of my friends and family are traditional believers.

5. How did / does this situation effect you?

I feel a bit frustrated because sometimes it seems I'm the only one willing to study the crazy historical record. People tell me I need to have more faith and that I'm overly analytical. I trust my conclusions about Church history, but it feels weird that everyone around me sees it differently.

6. How do you cope?

I cope by talking to people like you, my bishop, parents, and a close friend. I also see and hear other Borderlanders in the Bloggernacle and it helps me not feel so crazy.

7. How successful are in you in coping?

Mostly okay, but I'm still trying to figure out how to make it all work smoothly. It's a rollercoaster ride—some days are great and other days are troubling. It feels like trying to take a very gray viewpoint and fit it into a black and white kind of world.

8a. How open and honest are you with others about your situation?

I've been very open with my bishop, parents, sister, and a close friend.

8b. If you have kept it a secret, please explain why you felt a need to do that?

I'm outwardly a decent elders' quorum president, so I have been reserved about my unorthodox beliefs. I've felt I'm not supposed to talk about these issues with others at church, so I have been discrete and judicious in how much I tell and to whom. Also, I don't like talking about historical issues with unsuspecting members because I worry about collapsing all their dominoes.

8c. What would it take for you to be honest and open with others?

I feel there is a cultural shift happening: there is less pressure to have a "knowing" testimony about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, etc. And I'm trying to help that shift along by lightly encouraging Group 1 to be more comfortable with the issues and develop perhaps a more nuanced view of Joseph's history.

9. How did / does this Borderlands experience affect others in your life?

Every time I talk to people about it I feel like I'm planting seeds of doubt and feel a little guilty. I know that I sent my Mom through a tiny faith crisis that she decided to shut off at some point. The same thing happened with another friend (a locally celebrated Sunday school teacher) who now does not use the word "know" in her testimony and has questioned many things. But she is still a traditional believer. I've told them I respect their testimonies and consider them valid.

10. How have various people (e.g., spouse, ward members, children, friends) responded to you and your experience?

The main people in my life have been supportive and sometimes even kind of amazed that I'm courageous enough to weigh it all. I realize this may be unusual, but maybe more Group 1 members really are becoming more accepting of Borderlanders. 🌟

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is Column 53), 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.forthosewhowonder.com.

2. Any readers interested in contacting "Trevor" can send an email to me (jeff@eburton.com) and I will forward it to him.

3. Column 54 will discuss the challenges of being honest and open and how to deal with the issue.

4. Column 50, "Have the Borders Shifted?", related recent LDS conference talks concerning the natural and acceptable role of questioning and doubting.