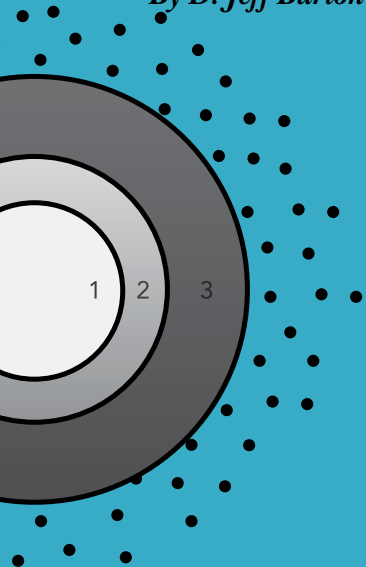


BEING THOUGHTFULLY AND LOVINGLY HONEST

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-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.
- DOTS:** Previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

IN PREVIOUS COLUMNS, published in 2005 and 2010, we explored the important issue of honesty.¹ At the 2015 SLC Sunstone Symposium, Dan Wotherspoon² and I shared the podium to further examine the challenges of honesty for those in the contemporary Borderlands. I collect my thoughts in this column—the next 5-year update.

In times past, many Borderlanders who still attended church told me that they didn't feel they could be honest about their beliefs when talking with others, especially if their beliefs did not follow a specific format or if they did not fully support the policies or official history of the Church. Here are three examples of messages sent to me in the past (shortened for this column):

"I've been in the closet all my life, even with my family. I don't like the dishonesty, but what other choice does the Church give me?"

"I recognize that I'm a hypocrite. To get a temple recommend I agree to statements that I don't literally believe. In essence, I lie. I don't like this, but I don't believe any greater good would be served by my quitting the Church and hurting my husband and children."

"One of my sons asked me about going on a mission. I do think a mission can be a positive thing, but I expressed some thoughts to him that were fabrications. I feel like my soul is tied between two poles: one that continues to pretend and lie, and the other that longs to express my true feelings. I feel like I'm tearing in half."

I used to hear these worrisome comments from Borderlanders all the time. But in today's world, we seem to have more latitude. President Uchtdorf, Elder Holland, and other general authorities have recently said things like, "We all have doubts and questions . . ." and, "Honestly acknowledge your questions and your concerns . . ." It used to be if you had questions or doubts you were supposed to keep your thoughts to yourself. No longer!

As reported in the *Salt Lake Tribune* by Peggy Fletcher Stack, Elder D. Todd Christofferson recently said, "We have individual members in the church with a variety of different opinions, beliefs and positions . . . In our view, that doesn't really become a problem unless someone is out attacking the church and its leaders—if it's a deliberate and persistent effort to try to get others to follow them,

trying to draw others away, trying to pull people, if you will, out of the church or away from its teachings and doctrines.”

Most Borderlands I’ve met are not interested in tearing the Church down or pulling people away. They just want to live in peace with their family and community. But doing so can still be a tightrope walk. Charged situations arise all the time: temple recommend interviews, tithing settlement, giving a Sunday school lesson, bearing testimony, interacting with a TBM boss.

These situations press us to represent our beliefs or feelings in an often less-than-direct way. How do we keep this “spin” constructive? How do we avoid deforming ourselves trying to meet the expectations of others? Being honest is much like being patient. It takes thoughtful management of the various forces and enablers we encounter.

Honesty seems like it should be a simple concept, but it has many subsets that we need to consider: emotional honesty, personal honesty, public honesty, loving honesty, thoughtful honesty, blunt honesty, brutal honesty, tactful honesty, undisciplined honesty; or, being authentic, frank, genuine, and impartial. Each of these might send us in a different direction in a specific situation.

Dishonesty has similar nuances: white lies, black lies; cheating, fudging; deceit, exaggeration; inaccurate information, incomplete information; spinning the truth, stretching the truth; plagiarism and exaggeration.

Let me give you a few examples of times when it can be difficult to tell what honesty is.

I once watched an ambitious stake high councilman subtly campaign to be our ward’s next bishop. He was the first to volunteer for any task the stake president wanted done. He stood in meetings and publicly supported the stake president in anything he said. He befriended the stake president’s wife and older children. And it worked; he was called to be our next bishop. His actions seem problematic, especially since the scriptures specifically instruct us not to aspire to church callings. However, he actually turned out to be a very good bishop. Was he being dishonest in his campaign? Or was he following inspiration? I’ll never know, of course. I just know that things seemed to work out.

When I was on my mission, if someone had asked me why I wanted to baptize people, I would have given the “presenting reason” first: “Because their lives will be better, fuller, and happier.” But it was also true that I had an ulterior motive: I wanted to baptize so that my proselyting record would look better. There was one case where I suspected a young man might have some family trou-

bles if he joined the Church, but that didn’t stop me from working to get him baptized. Such conflicts of interest can enable us to be less than totally honest.

Questionable honesty also crops up when we want to be part of the group. Our feelings or beliefs may not match those of the group and we may fear being expelled, so we keep some of our thoughts to ourselves. Is this dishonest, or is it simply one of the small sacrifices one must make to be part of a group—a sacrifice that everyone else in the group is making as well?

Of course, being a part of the group has deeper implications in Mormonism. For example, the temple recommend interview is a bi-yearly “are you in or out?” ritual: a gatekeeper for many other things like going to your children’s temple weddings. Temple recommend interviews are often dreaded by new Borderlanders; they feel that the questions must be answered literally and unambiguously in order to be answered correctly. However, from my experience in bishoprics, it seems to me that these questions point to ideals—things we should be working to understand or achieve. Are we seeking God? Are we looking for ways to sustain our leaders? Do we use the Church’s teachings as guides for living our lives? A bishop once told me, “I wish people would just say “yes” to the questions instead of explaining all their problems to me. If someone comes to me and wants a temple recommend and they want to go to the temple and can cover the basics, then I want to give them the recommend.”

Then there are testimony meetings: a time when we verbally affirm our investment in the community. For a while, the Church outlined specifics about how a testimony should be born, and for Borderlanders it was a really hard mold to fit. Fortunately, those rules have relaxed; we can now get up and say things like, “I don’t know for sure about everything, but I have faith that I’m doing the right thing, and I thank God for all my blessings.”

Probably the situations that are the most difficult to handle are the ones that surprise us, where we have little time to formulate our response. Sometimes a new situation challenges our previous notions and requires some mulling over. Or perhaps we haven’t had the time to consider the implications of making a particular commitment, or how to react to a particular kind of assertion or action, or how to be gracefully honest. It is in these situations where we may find ourselves telling “white lies”—our seat-of-the-pants attempt at navigating an unanticipated situation. We may also think our white lies are necessary to benefit someone (and maybe they are). Or we may follow a pre-established pattern familiar to those



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around us simply to keep the situation from breaking down, even if it goes against our true feelings or some information we have.

Preparing for such situations can help you interact more honestly. For example, role-playing a temple recommend interview with your spouse may be a great way to not only navigate the interview, but find some deeper insights into the questions themselves. Or perhaps you can role-play the bishop extending a calling to you. How do you create room to think about the calling and its implications? How do you ask good questions so you can understand what you might be getting into? If needed, how might you say no gracefully and honestly?

If you teach in your ward, it's helpful to anticipate the reactions you may receive to the thoughts and questions you will present, and then plan how you will encounter them. You may have a nemesis in the ward who often disagrees with things you say, or who uses a method of interaction that seems abrasive to you. How will that person react to what you will present? How can you couch your points so that you can draw the best reaction possible out of him or her? Most importantly, how can you avoid a situation where either contention arises or you feel compelled to be dishonest in order to smooth things over?

On the other side of the coin, it is also important to learn how to let other people be honest with *you*. It also can be helpful to *ask* others to be honest with you. Do you make room for people to express a different opinion? Are you open to the possibility of their view adding to the conversation? Or are you insisting on your own version of the truth? One thing I've noticed in my many discussions is that usually everyone has something insightful to contribute; we just need to make room for them to do so, or let them know that we expect them to do so.

You may also want to make a list of various kinds of honesty (such as the ones we talked about earlier), so that you can choose a constructive approach before you go into a conversation you know will be charged. For example, "When I speak with my mother tonight, I will be tactfully honest." Or, "I need to be emotionally and lovingly honest with my spouse about this situation." Or, "I need to be publicly honest about this issue."

One approach suggested by honesty-researcher Dan Ariely³ and familiar to Mormons is to make pledges or commitments to yourself and others. The next time you go to the temple, for example, add a personal covenant with God to be "more honest." Or, make a mutual pledge with your spouse to be more open with each other.

Finally, you'll want to start practicing corrective honesty. Essentially, there will be times when you realize that you led someone astray or left a false impression, whether intentionally or not. Perhaps you allowed an ulterior motive to guide your words, or perhaps you were trying to gain power or status in a situation, or perhaps you overstated the applicability of some data in an effort to prove a point. One of the important things Jesus taught was that our honesty with a person, our presentness with them, is more important than being "right."

To repair your honesty with someone, perhaps you'll need to say something like, "I mentioned to you last week that I have a testimony of the gospel. I need you to also understand that my testimony is based on faith, not knowledge." Or, "I said that I was friends with [some luminary], but I'm actually just a huge fan of her podcast." Or, "I realized that the *New York Times* article I cited during our conversation actually says more than I told you." This kind of correcting honesty may batter your ego a bit at first, but you'll find it becoming easier as you practice. You'll also find that other people reciprocate with corrective honesty of their own, opening a more constructive, trusting conversation space between you.

As you've probably realized from these thoughts, a big part of honesty is establishing clear communication channels. Some communication blockages are rooted in social norms and are therefore extremely difficult to dislodge, especially when we are in the thick of a charged situation. So it is often up to us to call upon our own creativity and thoughtfulness to mitigate the difficulties. I have coined an acronym that helps me keep honesty foremost in my mind when in LDS situations: TULCH, which stands for "thoughtful, unselfish, loving, correcting honesty." It likely won't become quite as famous as "ponderize" but I hope it can be helpful to you as you navigate the Borderlands. 🌈

NOTES

1. See columns 15 and 32. In my first column (this is column 54), 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 of the Borderland columns and my book *For Those Who Wonder* are available for free download at: www.forthosewhowonder.com.

2. Dan is the editor of *The Challenge of Honesty* by Frances Lee Menlove (Signature, 2013). He is also a former editor of SUNSTONE.

3. Dan Ariely, *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty* (HC Publications, 2014).