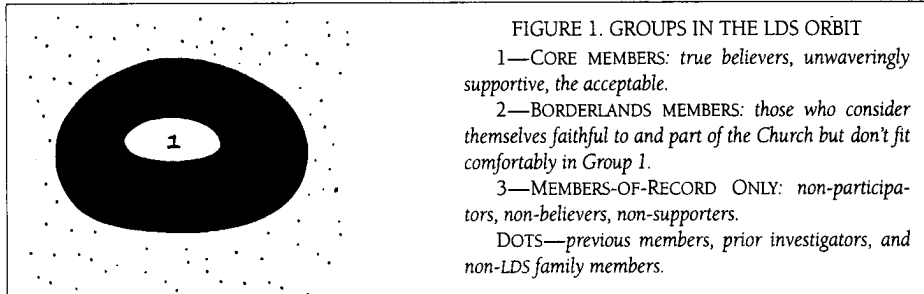


DOUBT PROVING FAITH

By D. Jeff Burton



OVER THE PAST several months, I've received a few questions as well as offers from some writers for me to share their Borderlander experiences in a future column.¹ In this column, I respond to two of the questions. In answering one, I offer a taste of one Borderlander's experiences that I'll relate in greater detail in the future.²

QUESTION 1: *Why do you write the Borderlands column?*

I write, hoping to serve those who live in the Borderlands by showing them that they are not alone, that someone or some organization such as Sunstone cares and understands their dilemmas. Borderlanders almost always have ties to the Church which make it difficult to move on beyond the Borderlands.

The following communication suggests several important reasons that many find themselves in the Borderlands (and why I write this column). The writer, whom I call Mary Ann, has agreed to share her full story in one of my upcoming columns. It is for people like Mary Ann (and you, and me) that I write this column. Some details have been changed here to protect her identity and privacy.

I am a forty-eight-year-old mother of three. I was raised in a part-member family, but I have been temple-married to a wonderful, faithful returned missionary for the past twenty-two years. I love this man with all my heart.

Although I attend church every week and have callings, I no longer

believe. Somewhere along the way, it just stopped making sense to me. I don't believe, for example, that the Book of Mormon is historical, and I don't know that Joseph Smith talked to God or angels. It just isn't there for me anymore.

But I love the Church. It is my safety net, and I don't want another lifestyle. I am grateful to be able to raise my children in the church.

I don't discuss my feelings with my husband. I won't do anything to hurt him, and I know this would. He knows that I have doubts, but I speak of the Church only in positive terms. In other words, I hold a great deal inside. It has been a very lonely journey for me, but my discovery of SUNSTONE three years ago has been a wonderful support. I feel much less alone now.

I also recognize that I might be a hypocrite. To get a temple recommend, I agree to statements that I don't really believe. In essence, I lie. I do not like this, but I do not believe any greater good would be served by my quitting the Church and hurting my husband and children. There is nothing in my lifestyle that would prevent me from getting the temple recommend. Looking in from the outside, I am the model Latter-day Saint sister and mother.

Tonight, one of my sons (who is

almost twenty-two-years-old) approached me about his going on a mission. His younger brother is serving one now, but he (the older boy) did not feel ready on his nineteenth birthday. He asked me point blank about my feelings concerning a mission and the Church. What I said would have made any bishop in the Church proud. I do think a mission can be a positive thing, but I expressed beliefs to him that were fabrications. Now I feel like my soul is tied between two poles—one that continues to pretend, and the other that longs to express my true feelings. I am tearing in half.

I am by nature a quiet person. I've never expressed these doubts to another person and likely never will. I don't know what I expect as a response from you. Perhaps your assurance that I am not a bad person despite my duplicity . . . and maybe some encouragement to continue in my present course and tough it out. Perhaps just writing this is enough to ease the torment I feel today. Anyway, thanks for being a fellow Mormon to whom I can express myself at a very honest level. Please protect my anonymity.

QUESTION 2. *In a recent October General Conference address, Elder M. Russell Ballard said, "Doubt is a tool of Satan." Could you respond?*

It is very important to pay attention to our general authority leaders when they speak. But we also must try to understand the context within which they speak. The word "doubt" has many meanings. Doubt can be a tool of Satan if it drives people to sin, do evil, or avoid doing good. Many of us know of people who have lost faith in God or themselves and then have behaved foolishly or sinfully as a result. For instance, a man who doubts God's instructions to be honest and then conducts dishonest business dealings is certainly playing into the metaphorical hands of Satan.

I think if you read Elder Ballard's entire address, "Pure Testimony," you'll see that he goes much deeper than that simple six-word statement. He says, for example, that "having a testimony" is a "profound blessing," which might suggest that a testimony may not be experienced by everyone. He also stresses that "testimonies grow and develop through

experience,” suggesting the continuing need for faith as confidence builds. His actual statement, “Doubt and fear are tools of Satan,” seems (to me) to refer to true believers who are lacking in boldness in bearing their testimonies. It doesn’t seem to apply to those of us willing to live the gospel by faith alone.

I like the way Robert Browning relates doubt to faith:

You call for faith:
I show you doubt, to prove that
faith exists.
The more of doubt, the stronger
faith, I say,
If faith o’ercomes doubt.³

Introducing the term “ultimate concern” to refer to genuine, lasting faith, Paul Tillich expands on Robert Browning’s coupling of doubt and faith.⁴ According to Tillich, doubt (or uncertainty) is unremovable and must be accepted as part of any act of faith. It takes courage to accept doubt, for with it is the potential for failure. In every act of faith, this risk of failure is present (with possibly devastating results if the faith act fails). The courage of faith is made possible because people “are never able to bridge the infinite distance between the infinite and the finite from the side of the finite.”⁵ But we are willing to take the risk of using faith because even failure cannot separate us from our concerns—such as life, meaning, and relationships.

All of this suggests the relationship between doubt and faith. Tillich contends:

If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith. [But] the doubt which is implicit in faith is not a doubt about facts or conclusions. It is not the same as doubt which is the life blood of scientific research.⁶

The doubt Tillich defines is neither one of skepticism nor one of rejection. Rather, it is the doubt associated with risk.

It is not the permanent doubt of the scientist, and not the transitory doubt of the skeptic, but it is the doubt of him who is ultimately concerned . . . the existential doubt. [Faithful doubt] does not question whether a proposition is true or false. It does not reject truth, but is aware of the element of insecurity in truth. At the same time, the doubt of faith accepts this

insecurity and takes it into itself in an act of courage.⁷

Tillich’s insight on doubt has a practical significance for Mormons who doubt. Many feel unwarranted guilt, anxiety, and despair about their perceived “loss of faith.” But better understood, doubt is a confirmation of faith.

One member suggested to me that there is a “quiet certainty” associated with his exercise of faith that has resulted in a “lack of doubt,” or more accurately, his not worrying about doubts. Many of us find a certain serenity in being faithful. But even among those for whom such a state of faithfulness has been achieved, an element of undeniable doubt still remains. And so it continues for those of us who have yet to receive the “blessing of having a testimony” described by Elder Ballard.

Tillich’s writing raises an important question for members of the Church. Can a community of faith such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accept a faith which includes doubt as an intrinsic element of faith and calls the seriousness of doubt an expression of faith? And even if the Church could allow such an attitude among its ordinary members, could it permit the same in its leaders? Today, the answers might be “maybe” to the first and “no” to the second. Such a position captures the very heart of why many members find themselves in the Borderlands. ☞

NOTES

1. In the first column, we 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, questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria.

2. When people volunteer to share their story, I usually like to conduct an interview by phone or by email. During that interview, I usually ask them to start to think about the following basic questions:

1. How would you describe your upbringing in the Church? (Please set the stage, giving background information about things such as activity level, parents and extended family, friends, mission, and temple marriage.)

2. What is your current status in the Church (activity level, temple recommend status, callings, and so forth)?

3. Using the three-part model employed by the “Braving the Borderlands” column, what issues/events/actions/concerns caused you to move into (or beyond) the “Borderlands?”

4. In what ways or at what times do/did you consider yourself in the “Borderlands?” What group(s) do you

consider yourself in now?

5. How did/does this affect you?

6. How did/do you presently cope with those issues/events/concerns?

7. How did/does this affect you?

8. How open or honest are you with others (such as spouse, children, parents, neighbors, ward members, friends) about your situation or about your issues/events/actions/concerns?

9. How did/does this affect your relationships with various people in your life?

10. If you’ve shared your issues with them, how have they responded?

11. (If applicable) what did/do you do to stay in—or move back to—Group 1 or 2?

12. What does your personal religion look like now?

13. What would you suggest to others now having the same experiences/thoughts/emotions/concerns you’ve had?

14. What do you believe you’ll do about your situation vis-a-vis the Church in the future?

15. What would you like to see the Church do about members who wrestle with doubts?

16. What else do you think we should know or would you like to say?

If you like to share your experiences, please send me an email.

3. Robert Browning, *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931); the poem appears also in many Browning anthologies.

4. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957). If all other personal concerns are subject to this ultimate concern (faith), then this type of concern promises total fulfillment. A good example of this is the ultimate concern of many LDS—pleasing, obeying, and loving God the Father. He is the one in whose name the great commandment is given: “Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and strength.” There can be no faith without a content to which it is directed—faith must always have a purpose. This approach may, on first reading, seem narrow, cold, methodical, and inflexible. But Tillich proceeds throughout his book to soften, humanize, enliven, enrich, and personalize his definition of faith. For Tillich, faith as ultimate concern is the commitment of the total person—the emotional, the intellectual, and the physical. The ultimate concern becomes the center of life and includes all life’s elements. Faith thus becomes the most personal and intimate of all personal acts—unconscious and conscious, and freely performed.

5. Tillich, 105.

6. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

Please send me any of your experiences, or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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