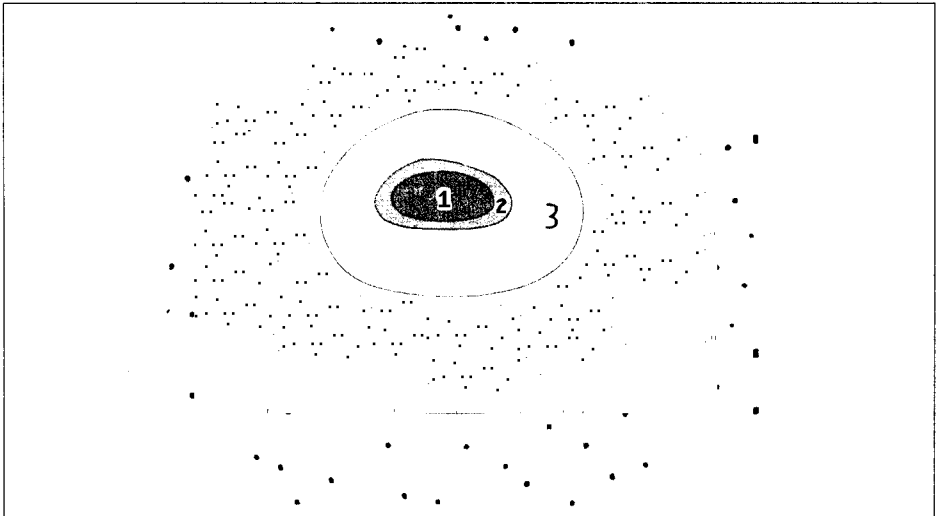


CHANGING OUR EXPECTATIONS

By D. Jeff Burton



1—CORE MEMBERS: true believers, unwaveringly supportive (approximately 20–25 percent of worldwide Church membership at any one time¹).

2—BORDERLANDS MEMBERS: those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but—for reasons I will explore in this column series—don't fit comfortably in Group 1. Among these people would be faithful skeptics; "closet doubters"; those whose jobs and families require them to remain active in the Church despite their personal preferences, "cultural Mormons"; those experiencing a faith crisis; some gay and lesbian activists; some LDS feminists, historians, and intellectuals; some serious transgressors; and so forth. Many of the people in this region are in transition from Group 1 to Group 3, and vice versa. (Estimate: 5–10 percent of Church membership at any one time.)

3—MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY: non-participants, non-believers, and non-supporters (approximately 65–75 percent of Church membership at any one time).

DOTS—Swirling around the membership is an Oort-cloud of previous members,² prior investigators who have elected not to join the Church but feel a connection with it, and non-LDS family members. This group likely numbers several million.

MY HOPE FOR this column is to help facilitate a discussion in which we can share and explore the experiences of Latter-day Saints in the "borderlands" of the Church.³ The borderlands, as I define them, are depicted above.

This model is over-simplified, perhaps. Over time, some members slip from group to group and back again. Some may be part of one group in some situations and part of an-

other group in others. Some may not self-identify with any group. Still, this model should aid in exploring how real individuals experience feelings of disharmony with Church doctrines, practices, and cultural sensibilities.

ONE important borderlands subgroup with which I am closely associated is the "lack-of-absolute-

surety" folks. At one extreme among these people are the "closet doubters," those who secretly question but stay active. In the middle are faithful skeptics, those building a testimony, and those who simply don't care. On the other extreme are those who realize they have too much curiosity or see too much paradox in life to have a "firm knowledge of the truth" of anything, including LDS faith-claims.

As the author of the book *For Those Who Wonder: Managing Religious Questions and Doubts*, I occasionally receive letters and calls from readers. One emotional, eight-page letter described one couple's twenty-year ordeal in the borderlands. I've changed their names and certain details to protect confidentiality.

Virginia begins by describing her husband as a very likeable man who joined the Church after they were married:

Shortly after joining, Terry was anxious and looking forward to the spiritual witness promised in the Book of Mormon. The witness of the Holy Ghost and the knowing inside was missing for him. So he read the Book of Mormon several times very seriously, praying long and often. He even fasted five days in a row while working.

Years went by, but the affirmation never came. People in the Church kept saying things like "You must have missed some step in the process," or "You're not humble—too intellectual." The favorite one was, "You have a testimony; you just don't know it." This frustrated and drove my husband nuts. Finally it got to the point that he could not go on this way any more.

Virginia then writes about how Terry went to his priesthood leaders with his dilemma. Over the next few years, he was asked by the stake president and his bishop to take important callings "out of obedience," and he was promised that through this service, the witness would come. She continues:

- My husband has always been an unselfish humanitarian and loves to do good and help people. So he always accepted the callings
- After twenty years of trying to get a witness of the spirit, he decided a person can "knock on a door only so long without an answer." So he left the Church. . . .
- You can go along without a testi-

mony for years, but after a while, you just don't feel good about yourself.

Terry's uniquely LDS experience is, sadly, quite common in our Church. Most of us know someone who has gone through this, someone who has lost his expectation of ever gaining a firm witness. And it is equally or even more traumatic when a true believer loses testimony or belief. For many, these losses result in trauma and grief not unlike the anguish, torment, and discouragement that visited Terry and Virginia for twenty long years.

The sad thing is, these traumatic testimony pains are unnecessary. I will explore this issue in a future column.

Virginia continues in her letter:

I was beginning to have doubts, too, but still wanted the Church to be true, so I kept going by myself. It felt miserable not having him there with me. One Fast Sunday as I was listening to everyone's testimony, I broke into tears, asking the Lord, "Why hasn't my husband gotten a testimony of this Church, why?" Incidentally, testimony meetings are the most frustrating for those without one—there's guilt, like, what's wrong with me?

She describes their eventual contact with a minister of another Church, who, over a period of time, helped them see that following Christ's teachings is sufficient, and that "knowing" is not really the key issue. She concludes her letter:

I regained my faith and worked on following Christ's teachings. It was like a rebirth for me, and I became closer to Jesus than ever before. My mind was cleared, and my confidence in the Church was reestablished. It was a wonderful experience for us, and we came back to the Church.

It is interesting that their confidence in the Church had to be reestablished by a minister from another denomination, and it is instructive that it was centered around learning and living Christ's teachings. By the end of her letter, neither Virginia nor her husband claimed to "know" that the Church was true. In fact, that issue wasn't even mentioned again. It apparently was no longer important to them.

SOMETIMES, we misplace our priorities. Do we see the Church's role as helping us live, learn, and gain confidence in Christ's teachings, or is it for some-

thing else? How important is it to have a witness of the truthfulness of the Church, in contrast, say, to living a Christ-centered life? How important, really, is knowing that "Joseph Smith was a prophet" in enabling us to be supportive of the Church? Is our ultimate concern to gain a testimony or to gain a real knowledge of moral values and practices?

I am thankful for groups such as Sunstone for giving us forums in which to explore the borderlands. As a new column editor, I would like the theme of this space to be an understanding that life in the borderlands can be OK, that borderlanders need not do drastic things, such as leave the Church, divorce their spouses, or destroy their families. Helping spare even one person a twenty-year ordeal like Virginia and Terry's would make my efforts in this column worthwhile—and your efforts, too. This column will be personal and created from real-life LDS experiences. If you are willing to share your experience in the borderlands, or any related ideas and thoughts, please contact me at the addresses below. I will contact you, and we can explore our experiences. And I will be happy to keep things confidential, if necessary.

And I'll try to include a little humor from time to time—our struggles in the Church can be pretty funny at times. ☺

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NOTES

1. These numbers are simply my guesstimates of worldwide percentages of total Church membership at any one time. They are based upon my conversations with members of the Church Correlation Committee about their "Survey of Religion and Life," and my conversations with BYU sociologists, returned missionaries, and Church members from around the world. I would like to see better estimates, if they are available.

2. Independent studies have suggested that during their lifetimes, three of ten Latter-day Saints will for various reasons have their names removed from official Church rolls—a number I find amazing.

3. Other descriptors for "borderland" could include: boundary layer, river bank, frontier, fringe, trim, margin, skin, edge, lip, rim, brink, and ledge, depending on how precarious it feels.