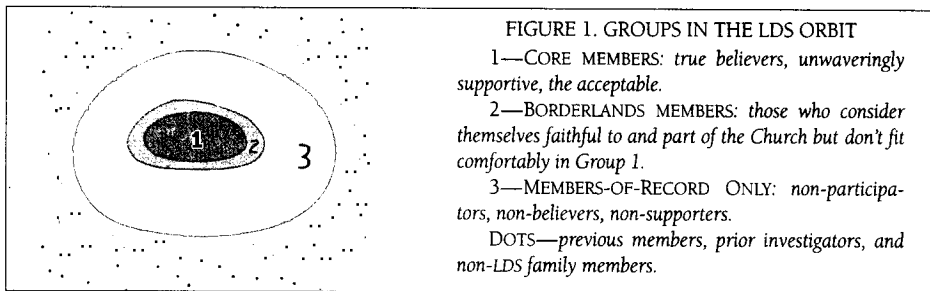


JESSICA'S STORY— UPDATE AND RESPONSES

By D. Jeff Burton



IN THE MARCH 2004 “Braving the Borderlands” column, I related the difficult experiences of “Jessica” (a pseudonym), a long-time Borderlander with serious questions and doubts about the origins of the Church plus a troubled relationship with her husband. After thirty years of struggle, she could be considered a “closet-doubter-at-the-end-of-her-rope.” You might also recall that Jessica is a very bright, mature housewife living in Utah County and married in the temple to a staunch Group 1 member. She is the mother of four grown children and was a convert to the Church during her teens. (Certain details were altered to protect her identity.)

UPDATE

JUDGING from recent phone and email communications, Jessica’s life seems to have greatly improved over the past few months. Following are some of our recent exchanges (edited for brevity and clarity).

JEFF: It’s good to know you’re in such good spirits! How have you been dealing with your problems?

JESSICA: I have let my problems, questions, and doubts have a lower priority in my life—just “letting them go.” Other things have taken higher priority: family, staying healthy, and so forth. It’s weird—I’m feeling very calm and peaceful.

JEFF: Have you honestly shared your concerns and problems with anyone?

JESSICA: Yes, amazingly, I had very unthreatening visits with both my stake president and bishop. They were very understanding and cordial. Both asked some questions to determine my level of “belief,” and I think they were reassured that, sans the Joseph Smith story and a few other church-related testimony issues, my faith and belief in God and Jesus are pretty strong. There are other mitigating factors, i.e., never having had a real understanding between my husband and me, never really feeling like I have him to fall back on. The only soft place I’ve had to fall back on was on Jesus Christ. Hence, I’ve developed a very strong testimony of him. And they seemed to go along with the idea that what I believe is more important than what I don’t believe.

So my decision to “let it all go” was likely inspired by Jesus. As you have said, Church history has no real application in my life today. If I don’t let the ninety-nine miles of bad road with my husband go, it will only hurt me further. And the Savior makes it abundantly clear that if we forgive not, we can’t expect to be forgiven.

JEFF: So how are you and your ward members getting along?

JESSICA: I am comfortable at church and have some very good friends there. I think it is easier to be converted to the people sometimes, because they are surely some of the nicest anywhere.

JEFF: What do you see in the future for you and the Church?

JESSICA: The visiting teaching message this month actually sums up the way I expect to proceed with the rest of my life. It is centered on Moroni 7:47. “Charity is the pure love of Christ

and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.”

RESPONSES FROM CHURCH LEADERS

IN the previous column, Jessica had asked about Elder Jeffrey Holland’s April 2003 conference talk, “A Prayer for the Children,” which, she worried, “essentially repudiates any skepticism, calling negative attention to ‘those who pitch their tents out on the periphery of religious faith’ (as though, if you don’t embrace Mormonism, per se, then you have no faith at all).” I told her that Elder Holland’s talk left me with a few questions, too, and that I wasn’t sure how he would treat those who don’t have the gift of “knowing”—people like Jessica and me who are willing to be faithful members of the Church without a Church-specific “testimony.”

I wrote to Elder Holland and several other General Authorities asking whether someone who is a non-testimony-bearing, “faithful-only” member is acceptable in the Church. I enclosed my bishop’s address and telephone number in the letters. Last month, my bishop called me to relate two very positive phone calls and a letter he had received from Elder Neal A. Maxwell, President Boyd K. Packer, and F. Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency. Among other positive responses, the letter stated, “You may assure Brother Burton that ‘faithful’ members like [him] are acceptable to the Church.”

Those are encouraging responses and give those of us who are willing to behave faithfully some real hope for the future.

RESPONSE FROM READERS

TOM Coppin shared with me the following thoughtful comments about the Jessica column (edited for brevity):

I reflected on Jessica carefully. Off the top of my head, I think her husband could be more understanding. His stance seemed sort of domineering. You can’t force your mate to comply and believe as you believe. Jessica needs a comfort zone and the right kind of friend (someone who could understand). Through love from her friends and husband, she could work things out from within rather than without. I feel she is trying to achieve too much, and when she can’t make the leap from faith to

“They seemed to go along with the idea that what I believe is more important than what I don’t believe.”

“knowledge,” she feels guilty. Jessica worries about being a closet doubter and probably doesn’t know how many closet doubters there are who get along pretty well.

Dan Pascavage offered the following thoughts and personal experiences (also edited for brevity):

Ah, my heart goes out to Jessica. I am not optimistic about the future of her marriage—primarily because I was in a similar situation and we just could not keep it together. I was, of course, in Jessica’s position. But I was totally traumatized by the reaction of my returned-missionary daughter, which was just like the one Jessica describes. I don’t know how much of this you want to tell Jessica—I don’t want to discourage her. But perhaps something I say here will help.

My home teacher recently challenged my wife and I to get temple recommends again. We are planning to do so, but not for the reasons he puts forth (our eternal exaltation). Mainly, we want to participate with our children, who are becoming good members, and go to the temple with them, and so forth.

Fortunately, we have a new bishop who is my kind of guy. And our friend, a former stake president, put in a good word to the new stake president for me. So I think we will be able to get the temple recommends, being tactfully honest as you have suggested. It feels so good being in the fellowship of Saints. (I get to help people move, etc.) Is this hypocritical? I don’t know. Is it hypocritical to give a placebo to a sick person who thinks it helps him?

Michael Barrett sent an email to SUNSTONE’S editor, part of which directly relates to the Jessica column:

Brother Burton advises Jessica that, when faced with probing questions about her beliefs during her temple recommend interviews,

the proper response is to be “tactfully honest,” a method which he helpfully explains so we may also use this splendid solution to a vexing problem. Hey, this will work! Thank you! Now I know how we should reassure our bishops, friends, and families that we support all the Church’s policies and teachings—and do it with a clear conscience. I’ll simply apply the new standard of “tactful honesty.” And I could kick myself for not having figured this out on my own. After all, people back here in Washington, D.C., do it all the time. It’s just that here they have a different name for it. *Lying*. Are you sure you want to be giving out advice like that?

After being forwarded the letter (the editor hoped that I might respond to it in the “Letters to the Editor” section), I chose to write Michael directly. Following is part of my response to him:

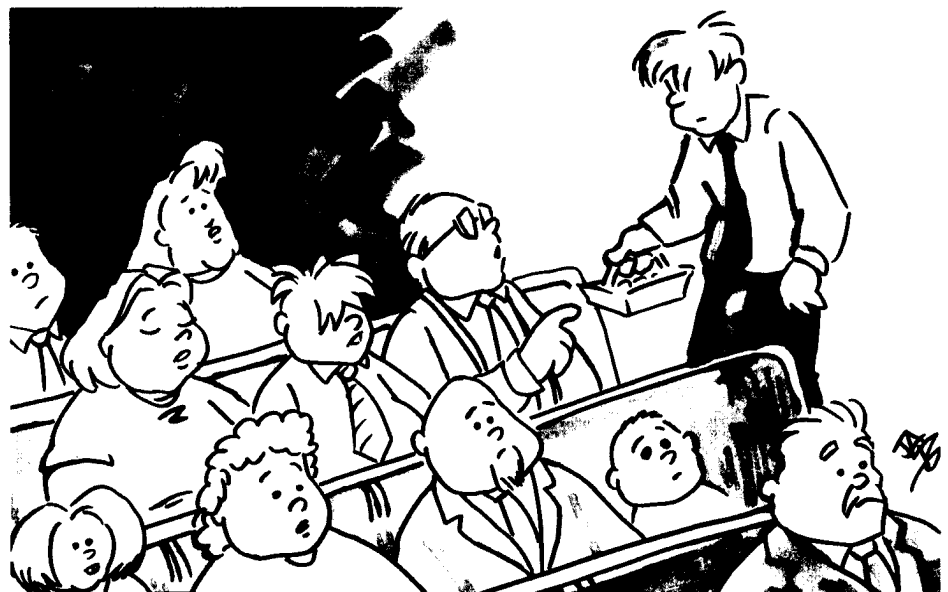
My very first LDS-related paper (SUNSTONE, September-October 1982) dealt with the “phenomenon of the closet doubter.” The definition of being “in the closet” includes a certain amount of dishonesty . . . up to and including

lying (e.g., lying in a temple recommend interview: “Yes, I know the Church is true . . .”). I have heard many stories of closet doubters who “lie” to maintain the illusion or appearance of being “a good Mormon,” or of “having a testimony.”

In urging doubters/questioners to “live by faith,” I mean to help them avoid lying. Faith is the bridge between what we know/believe and what we are willing to accept (or do) in the absence of a “testimony.” Unfortunately, we as a people have come to regard “testimony” as all-important, and “living by faith” (or “acting through faith”) as something less, even suspect. Coming out of the closet and staying active, while being honest, is possible when faith becomes one’s central driver (if testimony is lacking).

In response to this, Mike Barrett replied:

Thank you for the reply. Yes, I think your approach is fine in addressing the issue in your column. My primary concern is that we have so many docile sheep out there in LDS clothing, willing to lie (yes, lie) in order to avoid con-



“Can you super-size that?”

fronting the truth. They'll lie to keep peace with their spouses, bishops, families, and friends. They'll lie to keep their jobs. It's a good way to cope, if you can sweep your integrity under the carpet.

[I believe you are a kind person] but that you're an enabler. Actually, I think you're worse than an enabler. I think you're a liar. I don't believe, from what I've read, that you really have faith in all those doctrines and historical facts that you question. I think you actually seriously doubt them but that you're willing to lie and say you'll "accept them on faith." And you encourage others to do the same. If you're going to lie about "having faith in" a misguided Church policy or false historical claim, you should at least have the dignity (we can't call it "integrity," can we? . . .) to admit to yourself that that's what you're doing.

Yikes!

I don't know whether Michael Barrett was serving up an easy pitch right over the plate, but I think the disagreement between Michael and me centers around our different definitions of the words "faith," "accepting," and "having faith in." If one equates "faith" or "acceptance" with "belief," which occurs regularly in both old and modern scripture, then problems arise. Obviously, in my reply to him, I had not clearly stated what I meant.

In order for two people to communicate effectively, both have to speak the same language and understand one another. In an earlier column (SUNSTONE, October 2003), I explain how I use these key terms. The next few paragraphs of review might help us bridge the gaps that exist in the ways different people use these terms.

As I use them, belief, knowledge, and testimony relate to the mind, what we think. Faith relates to behavior, what we are willing to do in the face of doubts or lack of knowledge.

For me, acceptance, as it relates to faith, is the willingness to go along, to behave accordingly, to act as if it were true, not necessarily to believe.

Robert Browning probably said it best:

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.

As I see it, it is because of our questions, wonderings, concerns, and doubts that we

can fall back on faith to manage our religious questions, wonderings, and doubts.

Once we all have a meeting of the minds on the faith vs. belief vs. testimony definitions, it is then possible for me to urge people to be honest about their "doubts" (and, as many have pointed out, almost everyone has these) and then let "faith" bridge the behavioral gap—"I don't know . . . or I doubt . . . or I don't agree . . . but I will follow (or adhere, or act, or behave) using faith."

As regards "having faith in misguided church policies or false historical claims," such judgments ("misguided" and "false") are the opinions and conclusions of those making the judgments. We are not required to draw the same conclusions, but even when we do, they don't have to impact our faithful behaviors. Church members should be able to disagree with policies and historical conclusions and yet still remain faithful to the principles of Christ's teachings. Jessica's current thinking suggests that possibility.

Finally, yes, I hope to be an enabler, but not in the negative pop-psychology sense that "enables" people to perform self-destructive behaviors. Rather, I want members who are silently struggling, questioning, or doubting to be enabled, or empowered, to be honest as well as faithful, responsible Latter-day Saints, if that works for them. And, additionally, I hope for them to be accepted in the Church as full-fledged and worthy members.

This is a two-pronged religious quest for me. I'm working on both problems simultaneously—helping "doubters" be open and honest (and faithful, if they choose to be) and when they are faithful, having the Church (and its true believers) embrace them as fully acceptable members of the Church. The encouraging calls by two apostles to my bishop and the letter from F. Michael Watson seem to suggest that the latter is possible.

These two simple motivations are enough for me to be a faithful supporter of the Church and its wonderful but sometimes-struggling people. ☺

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

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