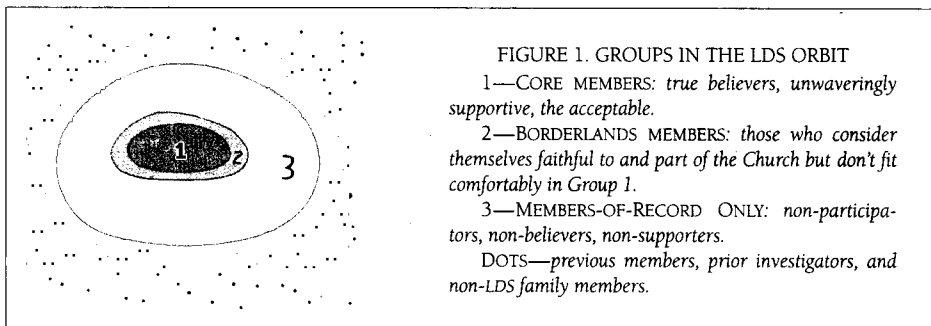


HONESTY

By D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, we explore the stories of Borderlanders in order to learn from the ways others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges in their church lives.¹ In the previous column (SUNSTONE, December 2004), I introduced a long-term Borderlander who has questions and doubts but remains “in the closet” about them, even to her husband. Here is a short reprise from “Mary Ann” (all names and some details have been changed to protect identities):

I also recognize that I might be a hypocrite. To get a temple recommend, I agree to statements that I don't 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. . . . 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.

Another reader, “Bill,” sent the following email:

I am a thirty-nine-year-old male, Utah born and raised, returned missionary, great temple marriage of sixteen years, BYU, three great kids, etc. Thanks for the “Borderlands” column. I have been firmly within the borderlands for a good fifteen years.

I [wonder about] many core [LDS] beliefs but still find the Church a good place to be. Reading about others in similar situations in your column has been insightful and welcome.

I have a comfortable understanding with myself as to my limited beliefs, and don't say more than I feel when speaking. I do feel very uncomfortable with the seeming hypocrisy of my situation, since most other ward and stake members think I am a liberal but faithful member.

Here are some recent questions from a younger Borderlander, “Sierra.” Sierra and her husband have begun to share with others their gospel struggles:

I have a few more questions for you. The first one is regarding coming out of the closet. We've talked with our parents and our

bishop about all of this, but we still feel a sense of duplicity. They perceive this as something we will work through. In reality, I think it is impossible for us to return to the type of belief we had before. I don't know—have we already come out of the closet?

So, what does it take to “come clean”? I don't think we ought to be getting up in sacrament meeting and bearing a non-testimony. I agree with you that it will help us feel better to be honest. But what should we do?

THE full stories of these Borderlanders are instructive, and I hope to share more details in future columns. However, a consistent thread through almost all of the stories Borderlanders have sent to me (and it is approaching forty people) is the issue of honesty. They wonder: Why do we feel a need to be secretive about our true beliefs and feelings? How can we deal with this need? What happens to us if we are not honest with others? How honest should we be? And, as asked by Sierra, “What should we do?”

In attempting answers to these questions, I will quote from one of the best essays ever written on this subject, “The Challenge of Honesty,” by Frances Lee Menlove.² And I'll borrow a few ideas from the latest edition of my book *For Those Who Wonder*.³

We must first recognize that honesty is a complex subject with many meanings, shades of color, and different applications. Think, for example, of the subtle and not-so-subtle nuances associated with the following words and phrases: “emotional honesty,” “personal honesty,” “public honesty,” “blunt honesty,” “radical honesty,” “tactfully honest,” “brutally honest,” “honest with self,” “honest with others,” “plagiarism,” “white lies,” “black lies,” “honest truth,” and “shading the truth.”

Honesty impacts all facets of our lives, not just religion. Menlove writes:

The problem of honesty is . . . shared by all men. Psychologists and psychiatrists have become increasingly concerned with the lack of authenticity and the sham that seems at times to permeate to the very core of Western man. As Mormons, we not only live in a society whose pressures and criteria for success and happiness can foster dishonesty and inauthenticity, but we have, we believe, a pe-

cular and divine mandate to seek truth and exemplify honesty. For these reasons it is crucial for Mormons to meet openly the challenge of honesty.

Further, I think we can all agree that good communication (or lack of it) impacts our ability to “be honest.” We may have every intention of being honest but be thwarted by inadequate or inaccurate communications.

GIVEN these complexities, we must narrow our exploration here to the issues of being open and honest with ourselves and with Group 1 members.

From my long experience in the Borderlands, I have observed that we who are faithful but not quite orthodox usually keep our interpretations and outlooks to ourselves. Sometimes, even our spouses don't know the extent of our beliefs, doubts, and musings. Why do we feel it necessary to be secretive about sharing our true beliefs and feelings?

First, we fear being ostracized, or worse, being put in the “handle with care” category reserved for investigators or those whom Group 1 members feel uneasy around. Mainstream believers often remain aloof and feel uncomfortable around those who ask too many questions or demonstrate a doubting nature. More serious, believing members often interpret someone's questioning of their cherished religious beliefs (and myths) as a personal affront.

Second, we fear that our chance for meaningful Church participation might be reduced. More than a few Borderlanders have written me worried that an unsympathetic bishop might deny them a temple recommendation.

Third, the church seems to tolerate divergent beliefs as long as we hold them to ourselves and don't try to sway others: “Keep your questions to yourself.”

Finally, many sense that it is not their place to say something that might alter the beliefs of another. “Coming out,” they fear, may be too great a shock for those whose testimonies rely to some degree on the strength of others' beliefs.

So, given this climate, it is difficult to be honest. Our honesty may disturb Group 1 members. It may affect others' testimonies. It may cause confusion and consternation among friends, family members, and especially, our children.

Clearly, public honesty about our lives requires great care, tact, and timing, but it is nevertheless very important to strive toward. So I advise members like Sierra to cautiously

and judiciously come out of the closet, to move toward full honesty. Being honest with ourselves and others helps us to come to terms with the reality of our experiences and our lives. It allows us to move on. It helps ourselves and others to accept us as we are. It also helps Group 1 members recognize that there is more than one way to be acceptably LDS.

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We Borderlanders, therefore, need to learn to speak “truthfully but discreetly”—we don't need to share everything we're thinking all at once. For the majority of us in the Borderlands, the specifics of what we believe are constantly being updated. Hence, at first, it's best to share our changed convictions in general categories. When asked about “testimony,” we might say something like, “I know the Church teaches correct principles. I know that the Lord answers prayers. He loves every person. We must all work out our own salvation.” Can we accept the president of the Church as a prophet, seer, and revelator? Some may say, “Why not? Certainly no one else speaks for God,” or “I can accept the possibility that he is a prophet.” Others may say, “I accept, through faith.”

As long as we remain in the closet, we may enjoy fleeting and temporary seasons of peace, but our movement toward full acceptance (by ourselves and others) slows. Like Mary Ann and Bill, we may come to feel like hypocrites, maybe even liars, and these negative emotions may further estrange us from God, our families, and Group 1 members. In Mary Ann's words, we may feel like we are being “torn in half.” For some the “lies” become intolerable and they suffer, sometimes injuring themselves and others around them. This suffering is unacceptable. Menlove argues:

There must not be two selves, one outwardly calm and unruffled, basking in the “knowledge” of the gospel, and the other private and

unexplored, pushed to the outer limits of awareness. If the individual does not have an honest relationship with himself, he cannot have an honest relationship with others. If he cannot avoid dishonesty within the Church, he will not be able to avoid it in the secular world. We must attempt to meet

the challenge of honesty, realizing that our honesty is enmeshed within a whole framework of values, and honesty, like truth, is always a partial achievement. There is only the latest word, never the last.

Of course being honest about our feelings and beliefs does not mean we should try to convert others to our ways of thinking. Let's allow others to have their own beliefs, even when they differ from ours. Support others in their beliefs as long as they don't hurt people. (Someone's belief in racism, for example, wouldn't warrant support). Let other people develop and live their own personal religions. Menlove cautions:


Honesty is often equated with *exposé*. A movie or book advertised as “honest” is often one that merely exposes something previously held secret or private. The notion seems to be that the one who can say the most unpleasant things is the most honest. Honesty can become a billy club, an instrument of aggression capable of destruction. It is just as dishonest to suppress or play down the positive, the hopeful, the good, the real achievements of the self and of the Church as it is to speak only of these.

It is disturbing that we faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints do not at present feel we can be honest about our lives if they do not follow a specific format or do not fully support the policies or

official history of the Church. This says something about LDS traditions which need to change; but for now and for ourselves, we must still strive toward the scriptural ideal: "Speak every man truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25).

HERE'S a thought experiment. Imagine you stood up in your ward testimony meeting and said in a loving and caring way something like this: "To me, the question, 'Is the Church true?' is not as important as the question, 'Is the Church good?' And the answer for me and for many millions of others, is 'Yes.' And so I am a faithful member of the Church and love being counted one with the body of Christ, with you, whom I love and cherish. That is my testimony." How do you think your ward, family, and spouse might react? Are you ready to slip a foot out of the closet? Done carefully and at the right time, might this not do a world of good for ourselves and for Group 1 members?

Only when we are honest are we likely to see the borders of acceptability expanded to include us. Frances Lee Menlove wrote, "Members of the church are responsible for the church."

In my next column, we'll explore the Borderland experiences of divorced members who are trying to stay involved and active. If you would like to share your experiences, please send your story to me. 

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the fifteenth), 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. See Figure 1. Copies of former columns will soon be available on the Sunstone website, www.sunstoneonline.com.

2. Frances Lee Menlove, "The Challenge of Honesty," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 44-53. This essay was reprinted in a special anniversary edition, *Dialogue* 34, nos.

1-2 (Spring-Summer 2001): 1-9. I have mentioned Menlove's article in past columns. It is one of the most thoughtful and well-written of all LDS papers and has probably had more influence on my life than any other.

3. A draft version of the fourth edition of *For Those Who Wonder* will soon be available via a free download. Contact me at <jeff@eburton.com>.

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

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