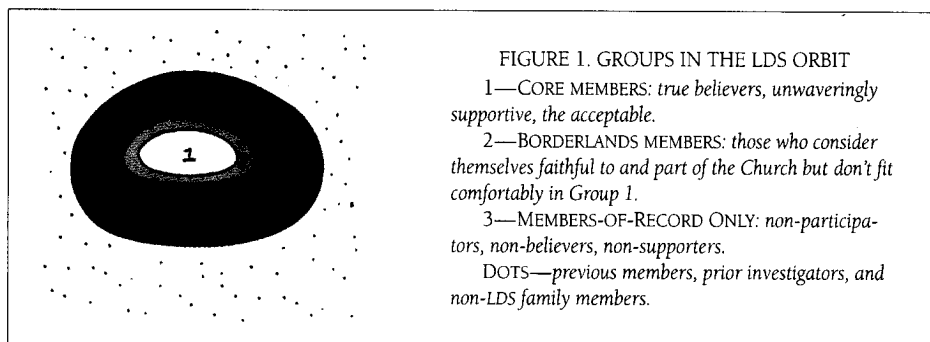


## NEWS AND MAIL

By D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN EXPLORES the stories of Borderlanders in order to share how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges.<sup>1</sup> Below, I describe a recent experience of my own and then share several items from my correspondence with other Borderlanders.

ON SUNDAY, 9 JULY, my bishop announced in sacrament meeting, “D. Jeff Burton has been called on a service mission.” Many turned to look at me, some in pleasant amazement, a few wondering, “How could he be getting a mission call?” Some of my fellow high priests were probably thinking, “He doesn’t even have a testimony!”

It is true that I don’t profess a “knowing” testimony of some important facets of our religion. And I’m open about it. For example, I can’t say that I *know* that Christ is the Savior of the world, but I acknowledge that it is certainly possible. I’m willing to accept that wonderful idea through faith, and I hope it is true. I *can* say that I know the principles of living that Jesus taught us are certainly true and, when followed, can save us daily from guilt, sorrow, and pain. It doesn’t take much experience to learn that being honest, for example, certainly makes our lives easier and is the right thing to do.

I can’t say that I *know* the Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates, but it is not unthinkable, and I’m willing to accept that possibility on faith. I *can* say that I know the Book of Mormon contains some valuable and worthwhile Christian precepts that can help us.

I can’t say that I *know* “the Church is true,” but it is possible, and I’m willing to accept that it is literally true for those who believe it is. I *can* say that I know the Church is worthwhile and important. It’s been a positive influence in the lives of millions, including my own. I’m happy to accept a mission call because I know it is worth lending my time and expertise.<sup>2</sup>

So you see my testimony is multifaceted but based mostly on faith and acceptance. It lacks the certainty many active members are blessed with. It contains many questions and doubts. Where I can test a proposition, such as, “Is honesty the best policy?” I have often come to “know” the truth of it. When a proposition it is not testable, such as, “Did the Book of Mormon come from gold plates? I am left with some uncertainty and must rely on faith.

Am I unusual? Is the lack of a knowing testimony wrong or a sign of weakness, sin, or worse?

I’ve mentioned D&C 46:13–14 before—the section on spiritual gifts—which says that some are given to *know* that Jesus is the Son of God and that others are given to *believe* on their words, and if they “continue faithful” will have eternal life. Note that “to know” is a gift from God. One of many gifts. Not all members get every gift. But to be able to live by faith—“to believe on their words”—is also a gift.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it seems to be the gift granted to many faithful Borderlanders.

Is one the better gift? Who knows. Both have benefits. We can explore that question in another column.

When I went to see my stake president about the mission call, he asked me the regular temple recommend “Do-you-have-a-testimony-of. . .” questions, and I responded, “My testimony is mostly faith-based rather than knowledge-based.” He said, “Well, in the end, isn’t that all any of us have?” We got along great, and the call went forward without a hitch.

Is a solely faith-based testimony acceptable to receive all the blessings of the gospel? My bishop and I explored this question in a letter I sent to the First Presidency. President Packer actually called my bishop and told him “yes.” My bishop also received a letter from the First Presidency’s office that says, “You may assure Brother Burton that faithful members like him are acceptable to the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, my receiving a call to serve a mission is another evidence of acceptance. You might consider my experience the next time you wonder about (or someone else wonders about) your worthiness to go to the temple, serve a mission, or be active.

How open and honest should we be with other members if we have questions or doubts, or haven’t yet received the gift of “knowing”?

Honesty is one of the cornerstones of our religion. It is my testimony that when we are honest with ourselves and tactfully honest with others, we can minimize the conflicts, guilt, and stress that come with practicing a subtle deceit.

### FROM THE MAILBOX

“Jared” (whom I quoted in my most recent column on “divorce”) sent another thought about how to deal with regular members after they know you’re a Borderlander.

My point is, you should not slink off feeling rejected and ostracized even if, in a sense, you really are at first. People respond to an upbeat, friendly, optimistic demeanor and an outward demonstration that you *do* love the Church and the people by, for example, continuing to volunteer for service projects, helping with picnics, putting up chairs and tables, etc. Pretty soon they treat you like nothing has changed. But you have to *act* as if nothing has changed.

And when asked about my testimony (by anyone who might understand), I now respond with something like, “Yes, I do still have

a testimony, but it is not the same as it used to be. I used to see things in black and white and had a 100 percent soft, unexamined testimony of everything, thinking it either has to all be true or the whole thing is bogus (as we have often heard from some leaders). Now I have a hard and firm, excruciatingly examined testimony (pick your percentage—15, 50, or 75) of some seminal eternal principles found only in this church, which has been tried by fire which I 'know' as much as one can know anything in this life. The rest of it? I don't know. I will not say anything is not true, I just do not know for sure what is and what is not. I don't rule anything out, and I am working on it."

"Ted" (not his real name) wrote:

My oldest son, who lives in Denver, married a mother of three about two years ago. Now they want to be sealed in the temple, and he wants my wife and me to attend. My wife is very worthy and has started, with my blessing, getting her recommend, garments, etc. in order. I, on the other hand, do not feel "worthy." (Actually, as one who has never smoked, drunk nor drugged, served a mission long ago, and was a virgin at my own wedding, etc., I find the word "worthy" too narrow in this case.) So I told my son and my wife that I would love to be with them but would not lie in response to any interview question in order to get a recommend.

So what do I do? Disappoint my son and wife by being "true" to myself or lie and stretch the truth in order to serve the higher calling of my family's happiness and bonding? What's the difference in "lying for the Lord" during

polygamy and lying for a good cause now?

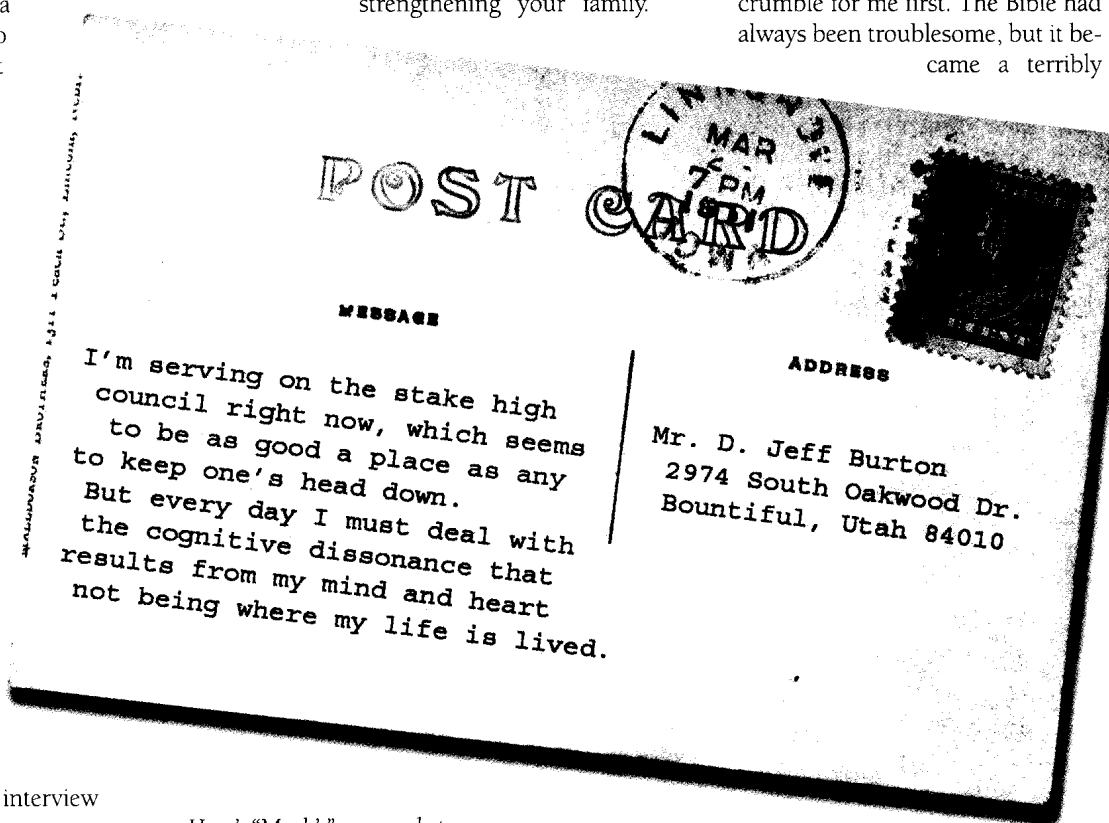
My response to Ted: Yours is a familiar dilemma. Having recently re-obtained a temple recommend myself, I know the quandary, but it isn't really that big of a deal. And it doesn't require any lying. In fact, honesty is the best policy.

When asked, "Do you have a testimony of . . .," you can respond, "Well, I may not know everything completely, but . . ." then choose what fits you best: "I'm willing to accept that it is true through faith," "I'm willing to behave as if it is true," "I don't really 'know' anything, but I accept that it could be true," "I hope and pray it is true," and so forth. It helps to divide what you know from what you are willing to accept on faith.

I strongly urge you to go with your son and his new family to the temple to show your support, to strengthen your family and your relationships with your wife, son, daughter-in-law, and grandkids. Nothing is more important in this life than serving and strengthening your family.

ously adhered to the scriptures and manuals, feeling that any doubts or other trains of thought I've harbored belong only to me [and were to be minimized]. I had no business using Sunday classes as a forum for my own wondering, for example.

So what happened? I'm afraid I violated my agreement with myself not to think too much about the Church, the gospel, its history, etc. I was supposed to just be active and not think about it. I sort of knew if I did think and inquire, there would be difficulties. But I forgot many years ago and began "reading around," at first mostly about the history of religion and the popular books about mythology by Joseph Campbell. I confirmed things that had nagged at the back of my mind for a long time, and the foundations of the Judeo-Christian beliefs began to crumble for me first. The Bible had always been troublesome, but it became a terribly



Here's "Mark's" personal story:

I once had a pretty firm conviction of the "truths" of the restored gospel and lived my life in solid activity. I served a mission and graduated from BYU. I have always held callings, including Gospel Doctrine teacher. During those lessons, I rig-

flawed document, not what it was presented to be, and a darned sight more interesting. I believe it is a crucial document in the development of our society, but I believe we have missed the power embodied in the myths preserved

for us. We no longer “know” as a people nor as individuals how to read and use myths as scripts for our lives and as ways of talking about how things happened in the past. We lost that when we decided and accepted that the myths were history. They are bad history, sort of like little time bombs that go off from time to time when something else can't be reconciled with recent objective findings.

And the same could be said for the Church. Without making specific arguments, suffice it to say that I began to discover irreconcilables in our history and present happenings, and without much left of the usual basis of Christian belief, I had little difficulty doubting the way things have always been presented to us in the Church. I understand the institutional motivations for what is left out or distorted, but as with the myths that become history, the history that becomes sanitized and fitted to an agenda eventually bumps painfully up against “facts” as they are uncovered. I believe Joseph Smith was a genius who indeed could have been inspired to write the Book of Mormon. It just isn't handy for the Church to have the Book of Mormon portrayed as something other than the literal history of events that occurred in the Americas. I believe it is an important document that does indeed change lives.

I have my sweet, stalwart wife who teaches early morning seminary and has done so for seven years now, and I have the kids and the rest of the family in Utah and California, and for them and the friends I've had for years here in the Church, I keep at it. I'm serving on the stake high council right now, which seems to be as good a place as any to keep one's head down.

But every day I must deal with the cognitive dissonance that results from my mind and heart not being where my life is lived. And I don't really have the time or opportunity to fully understand where my mind and heart belong. I guess that is my sacrifice for those I love, and it does seem possible to carry on living “Mormon” for the dura-

tion. At this point in life (I'm getting on in years), it is what I know how to do, and I do it pretty well. I don't know how much more at this point it is appropriate to share, but sharing at least makes me feel like at least one other person has heard some of what is festering inside.

*My response to Mark:* You've carved out a nice niche for yourself, one that seems to have worked okay so far and is a worthwhile sacrifice. I wouldn't hurry into changing what you're doing unless the dissonance begins to “fester” too much and you see a clear path that doesn't knock your loved ones over.

My ultimate goals are to help Borderlanders survive the trauma, and then move into a comfortable and an acceptable honesty with themselves and others. (That also requires true believers to accept the “faith-based” member as an equal. So I'm working on that front, too.) The important thing for members like us isn't the question, “Is the Church true?” but rather “Is the Church good?”

I believe it is for me, for you, and for many others like you.

*“John” sent this email:*

You recently touched on the subject of divorced Borderlanders (SUNSTONE, May 2005). Perhaps the most difficult issue for me as a divorced man in the Church was our local leaders rigidly adhering to a ward boundary policy. When I first divorced and moved out of my children's stake, I was urged to attend my new ward. I tried that and felt sick over it. After praying earnestly, I felt the Spirit directed me with unmistakable clarity to attend and be active in the ward my children were attending.

After meeting with my “home” stake president, he indicated that I could attend my children's ward, but on a voluntary basis. This I did. I went to my children's stake president and asked for a calling. He told me that what I was doing was “contrary to the organization which the Lord had established on earth,” and said that “they did not issue callings to people whose records they do not have.” I went back to my home stake president and asked for a transfer of records. He indicated that he could not offi-

cially sanction my being in the other ward.

My “visitor” status in my children's ward has led to problems and embarrassment. When my son went on a mission, I was not invited to speak at his farewell, for example, but his mother was. Not having any calling pushes me into the borderlands and makes maintaining healthy relationships difficult.

If the Church is to support families, divorced or not, both the mother and father should be seen as important in the spiritual lives of their children. Any father earnestly striving to be with his children and to do what is right should be recognized. Part of this recognition is for local leaders to allow full participation with his children in church and all the peripheral activities which are so important in the church lives of young people. ☒

#### NOTES

1. In my first column (this is number 17), 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 the figure. Copies of former columns are available on the Sunstone website, [www.sunstoneonline.com](http://www.sunstoneonline.com).

2. My calling is a part-time service mission with the Church's Risk Management group and involves all kinds of environmental activities, e.g., control of mold in ward buildings located in hot and humid climates. I have a small office on the sixteenth floor of the Church Office Building.

3. There is no verb form for “faith.” In many cases, when one wants to make faith active, the verb “to believe” is used in its place. This is common usage in the King James Version and in many LDS books and writings.

4. I have a copy of the letter. If you would like to discuss it, please contact me.

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

*D. Jeff Burton  
2974 So. Oakwood Dr.  
Bountiful, Utah 84010  
[jeff@eburton.com](mailto:jeff@eburton.com)*