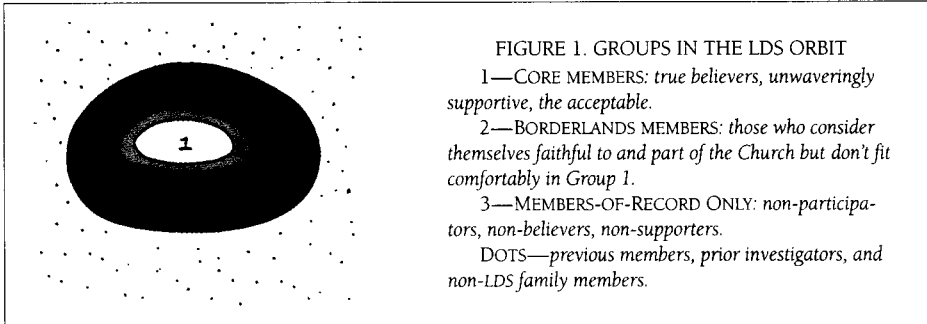


DEVELOPING AN LDS-COMPATIBLE PERSONAL RELIGION

By D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN EXPLORES the stories of Borderlanders because it is useful to know how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges.¹ Since my last column, I've spoken with several people who had interesting questions.² In this column, I share one of them, along with an extended version of my response. Since the following recounts a conversation that took place over an hour-long lunch, I don't have a written record, but I remember it well enough. As I did during the conversation, I'm borrowing some thoughts from my book, *For Those Who Wonder*.³

My lunch was with "Jake," a thirty-something man from Provo, Utah. His essential struggle is over maintaining his integrity while still feeling acceptable to family and church associates as a "faithful" rather than "testimonied" member:

I've decided to try to stay with the Church, despite my doubts, reservations, and concerns. But I'm torn up inside because I can't bring myself to "do all things," to follow every Church practice and procedure. I just don't feel that compatible anymore. How can I make this work for me and yet stay active and "acceptable?"

My replies over the next hour or so took the following basic form:

For you to successfully "stay," you must have faith in yourself, God, and the Church, maintain a continued relationship with God,

and create a suitable model for living your own "personal religion" which will be based on the foundations of Christ's teachings and be compatible with the LDS model. You will carefully select attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors appropriate to your needs. You must also be honest with yourself and others as you make changes. Existing motivators will have to be examined and modified, as appropriate and possible. Let's explore these issues.

LDS personal religion. The Church encourages members to develop a personal religion and personal relationship with God but in accordance with its model (with which you are pretty well aware). Its foundations, for example, consist of Christ's life and teachings (e.g., honesty, morality, prayer, love, giving, sharing, service, and faith.) The Church also has many policies and procedures unique to Mormonism and provides many opportunities for service and growth as part of its model.

LDS-compatible personal religion. In building an LDS-compatible personal religion, you should incorporate the Church's requirements and opportunities and be sure yours is built upon the same foundations. As such, your model for righteous behavior and attitudes will be in concert with, but perhaps different in some respects from, the LDS one.

Why it can work. Some have told me that the "compatible personal religion" approach

is impossible for them. I agree that it may be impossible for some, but I think it may be possible for others because:

- Gospel blessings come through following Christ's teachings and through appropriate behaviors. For instance, it does not require a testimony of Joseph Smith to be honest in your business dealings and receive the attendant blessings that follow honest speech and behavior.

- A personal relationship with God is available to anyone. God is no respecter of persons and loves each person equally. Prayer continues to provide a communication channel.

- There is a certain acceptable latitude with respect to particular beliefs about the LDS religion, making it possible for us to diverge to some degree from the standard model without alienation. For example, it is not necessary to have a unwavering belief in the divine origin of the Book of Mormon to attend church, enjoy and magnify one's calling, and live a Christlike life.

- It is possible to be open and honest about our beliefs and feelings. It may not be easy, but it is usually the best approach for ourselves and for others. Emotional health is easier to maintain when our actions follow our true beliefs.

A caution. If you choose to create an LDS-compatible personal religion and be honest with those around you about your beliefs, the worst thing you can do is begin changing things without plans or assistance. In their anxiety, discomfort, or anger, some people simply tear things down, speaking only in terms of what they "don't believe," and then do nothing more.

So, before making changes, it is usually wise to consult with someone who is understanding of your plight. Talk it over with your parents, your friends, your spouse, and others who care about you. Help is available from others who have successfully managed to develop a comfortable home within the Church even without an unwavering testimony. LDS Family Service counselors have dealt with these issues countless times. I often urge people to talk things over with their bishops. I believe that besides your benefiting from their counsel, you are in a position to be of great service to your bishop, who can gain valuable insights to the reality of questioning and wondering when someone is courageous enough to be honest with them, and mature enough to avoid anger and accusations. It can help bishops see that "faithful" in addition to "testimonied" members are acceptable, too.

Before you embark on this journey, it is also best to have some idea of what you hope your new personal religion will look like. If possible, it is best to (1) make a conscious decision to strengthen your personal relationship with God, (2) assess your family's needs regarding your lifestyle and religious practices within your home, and (3) write out a model for your religious life that is compatible with Christ's teachings, LDS culture, and Church rules. (See sidebar below for an example of one member's attempt to develop an LDS-compatible personal religion.)

Risks. Although a "personal religion" approach such as this one above may seem inviting, it carries some risks. Your spouse, children, or neighbors may dislike the changes, the disruption, and your rearrangement of the standard LDS model. It may be threatening to them. It is important to ask yourself: What if other family members follow my lead? You must realize that it may create unity, but it may also result in stress and strain if they, in turn, carry their changes to excess. If you make these changes, some local leaders may disapprove and distance themselves from you. Additionally, this per-

sonalized approach can cause real trouble if the changes you make are sudden, dangerous, or ill-advised. The whole enterprise may cave in around you if your changes are too radical, or you may be asked to leave.

Despite the risks and heightened responsibility it requires, I recommend this approach as an alternative for members like you who otherwise are ready to leave the Church. Under the circumstances, this approach is potentially the least disruptive for you. It may save you and your family from a lot of unnecessary stress. It might be worth a try before you give up.

Living your model. Living your model will be difficult at first. Don't be afraid to back off and change the model to be more realistic and workable. Most of us first develop models that are more stringent than we can live and that are in many ways stricter than the official LDS model.

Motivation. The first thing you will notice after adopting a new model for a religious life is the need for new motivators. In the existing Church model, prime motivators for following the rules (e.g., Word of Wisdom,

tithing, temple work, preparing and teaching lessons, attending meetings) include both "presenting" motivators (those we like to mention, e.g., love of God, love of Church, obedience to God, individual growth, eternal rewards, personal satisfaction, tradition), and "hidden" motivators (e.g., group pressure, guilt, fear, and possible divine punishment). These latter motivators, while strong, are often obscured and rarely mentioned, except perhaps when we deny their existence or importance. When used, they have a positive sounding tone: "I couldn't afford *not* to pay tithing," is a positive and non-threatening way to say, "If you don't pay tithing, God will not only not provide for you, but he will also take away that which you have."

Hidden motivators, recognized and acknowledged or not, are powerful and influential, and you must deal with them if you are to change your personal religion and still remain at peace with yourself. You might evaluate to what extent these hidden motivators influence you. Do you know when you are motivated by deep-seated guilt and fear? It is the last thing most of us want to admit. We prefer to think that we make decisions based on goodness or on rational, reasonable analysis.

EXAMPLE OF AN LDS-COMPATIBLE PERSONAL RELIGION

AS IT PERTAINS TO GOD: I try to understand God and my relationship with God. I pray and stay close to God. I acknowledge God's goodness in my life. I show thanks to God by the way I treat others. I acknowledge that I do not know all there is to know about religion and God, relying on faith to bridge the gap.

AS IT PERTAINS TO CHRIST: I try to understand and follow Christ's teachings for living the abundant life. As such, my personal religion includes these behaviors:

- I study Christ's life and teachings.
 - I try to follow Christ's example.
- For instance:
- I adopt the motto: "Do unto others."
 - I care about other people.
 - I try to "turn the other cheek;"
 - I try to forgive.
 - I try to be honest with myself and others.
 - I share what I have with others.
 - I honor my parents and grandparents.

AS IT PERTAINS TO MY FAMILY: I make my family's interests the highest priority. I try

not to let my own beliefs and feelings be too disruptive to their religious growth and what they experience for themselves. I support my spouse and children in their beliefs and Church activities. I contact teachers and leaders and encourage them to teach Christian ways of living to my children. I negotiate acceptable arrangements concerning my Church activity with them on a timely basis. I respect my children's right to have a stable home life.

AS IT PERTAINS TO OTHER PEOPLE: I listen. I try to understand others. I accept others and their personal religions without criticism. I allow others to have their own beliefs, feelings, and desires. I try not to convert other Church members to my ways of seeing and believing, but I am honest with others about my life. In doing so, I try to control and manage emotional responses (e.g., anger) which may hurt others. I communicate my desires, feelings, and beliefs, but in ways which will not hurt others. I listen to other people without criticism. I negotiate and compromise with others to solve problems. I respect others' rights to privacy. I take

responsibility for all of my actions and attitudes that may hurt others.

AS IT PERTAINS TO MY PERSONAL LIFE: I accept things as they are. When I have problems, I try to solve them. When I make mistakes, I say, "I'm sorry." I forgive others. I accept the principle of moderation in all things. I exercise, eat correctly, and maintain good health practices. I strive to continue my education. I try to see the full reality of every situation. I am honest with others about myself, my beliefs, and my feelings. I seek help and counsel when I cannot understand or solve a problem on my own. I listen to other points of view. I avoid letting unwarranted guilt and fears drive my behavior.

AS IT PERTAINS TO THE CHURCH: I am honest about my beliefs and feelings about the Church, but I am not unfairly critical of it or its leaders. I remain an active participant, as it benefits me and others. I accept callings which are compatible with my abilities and desires. I take responsibility for my activity in the Church. Through established channels, I seek to change Church programs that I believe can be more beneficial.

It is possible to be open and honest about our beliefs and feelings. It may not be easy, but it is usually the best approach for ourselves and for others. Emotional health is easier to maintain when our actions follow our true beliefs.

Of course, guilt is a sometimes useful emotion, and fear is an ancient, deep-seated, and powerful feeling. Both can lead us to correct and safe behavior. When these feelings keep us from killing, lying, or stealing, they serve us.

However, as Latter-day Saints, we sometimes feel misplaced or unwarranted guilt and fear. If we feel guilty about something which is not wrong or fear something which is not threatening, then guilt and fear are poor servants. They bar us from thoughts, beliefs, and activities which could enrich our lives.

At one time, I was involved with LDS Family Services as a lay counselor. The following real-life stories illustrating these points are drawn from that experience.

- “Norma,” active for most of her sixty years, called to say that her husband, “John,” a faithful and unquestioning member of the Church, had been suffering from depression for several years. John had never been called to be a member of a bishopric. As a result, he felt God must be displeased with him, that he lacked “valor,” or had not been forgiven for past mistakes. He could not identify any act or sin which might reasonably have prompted any Divine displeasure, but nevertheless felt consuming guilt and overwhelming fear for the future and his salvation. Norma wondered if she were the “cause” of the “problem.” Was her own “unworthiness” responsible for her husband’s “failure?” After several meetings and subsequent reassurance from their bishop, the feelings of depression were relieved.

- “Marie” suffered from chronic vaginal bleeding and actually believed she was within weeks of bleeding to death. Her doctor had warned that unless she had a hysterectomy, she would eventually die. She refused the surgery because she was driven by feelings of fear. Her patriarchal blessing had promised many children “if she was worthy.” A hysterectomy would be a sign of unfaithfulness, an acknowledgement of unrepentant sin. It would be a sign that Marie was not worthy of God’s promised blessings so she thought it better to die than to contravene the promises. Eventually, after some talk, her bishop and stake president suggested that her interpretation of the blessing was too literal. She eventually came to accept that the blessings could be achieved in the afterlife or with surrogate “children” in this life. She went on to have the surgery, but with some

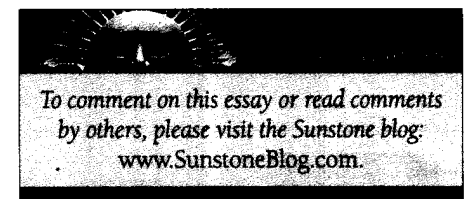
misgivings, not having completely purged herself of the unwarranted fear.

These are examples of the kind of inappropriate and destructive guilt and fears that must be overcome before you can be completely happy living your new personal religion; and this may be a lifelong task, a difficult challenge which will require much courage, thought, and effort. Being honest with yourself and looking deep within the reality of your life is the first step in overcoming these enslaving and inappropriate motivators.

Finding New Motivators. Living the foundation principles (e.g., honesty, morality, love, kindness, giving, faith, following Christ’s teachings) are essential to successfully living the new model. Motivators for living the foundation principles include both presenting and hidden elements. Whatever motivates you to do these things, even if not entirely appropriate, can basically remain unchanged, for at least you reap some benefits from appropriate behaviors and attitudes. Blessings follow largely from action, not ideals. Hopefully, however, you will eventually move away from guilt and fear, and adopt more appropriate motivators, such as: “I am active because I want to be, and I know it is good for me and others,” or, “Christ showed us the way to live, and I believe he is right, so I do what he suggests.”

Finding sufficient motivation for continuing to follow the organizational requirements of the Church may be more difficult. Unreasonable and unwarranted fears and guilt will no longer be effective motivators. Group pressures will weaken. Old motivators will have to be replaced by more mature motivators such as personal choice and responsibility, positive and loving attitudes, faith, and respect for your children. Rewards can continue to motivate but hopefully they will be moved from heaven to earth, deemphasizing eternal glories and looking more toward the rewards that follow from simple goodness, doing well, seeing your children happy. Group pressures and the groups you identify with may expand to include more than just your ward and Church associates. You will have to identify and evaluate these new pressures. Simply choosing to live in the “real world” and a life informed by reason become important motivators. Being open and honest with others about your life is, in itself, a motivator.

CREATING a new model for a religious life is a challenge, but it can be very rewarding for those who succeed. James Fowler suggests that as a crisis of faith passes, a person will either move from his “Stage Four” (wondering, doubts, tension, turmoil) back to “Stage Three” (safely being part of the group) or forward to “Stage Five” (comfortableness with a life that is less certain and circumscribed, greater acceptance of diversity and the notion of faith as an ongoing “journey,” and so forth). Those who venture or stumble into the wilderness of Stage Four can look to the promise and blessings of Stage Five, or to the safety of Stage Three.⁴ Whatever you choose, even if it is remaining for quite some time within a Stage Four state of doubt and a constantly rearranging worldview, you can still lead a religious life compatible with the traditional LDS model. ☺



NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the eighteenth), 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.

2. If you would like to speak to me, just send an email or letter. I regularly meet on the phone or in person with members who would like to discuss their situations.

3. A new fourth edition draft is available as a pdf file for a free download. Just send me an email, and I'll send you a copy of the pdf file.

4. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 151–98.

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

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