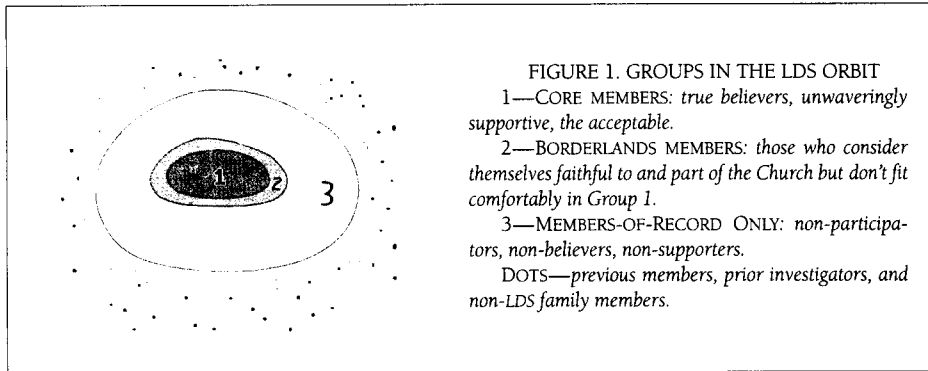


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

ON BEYOND THE BORDERLANDS

By D. Jeff Burton



IN MY FIRST column, I introduced the concept of the “Borderland” member. A Borderlander could be someone who holds an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony, a different view of LDS history, questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings that they somehow don't meet Group 1 acceptability criteria. Statistics hint that as many as 80 percent of those baptized worldwide either leave the Church, are asked out, or move to Group 3 (or beyond) during their lifetime. A few inhabit the Borderlands, hoping to keep their Church affiliations alive.

As readers of past columns may have surmised, my hope is for all who question their Mormonism to sojourn in the Borderlands until they have thoughtfully and prayerfully determined their best course for the future. I have seen some jump directly from Group 1 to Group 3 or beyond, and a few who jump right off a cliff into the dangerous shoals below. Those who take the time to carefully evaluate their situations while in the Borderlands often determine that returning to Group 1 or staying in the Borderlands is the best course of action for themselves and their families. Among those who do move

on, most seem eventually to regain a sense of peace and find various pathways to a happy life and a connection to divinity. Others struggle for a long time—the individual stories of people in Group 3 and beyond are as varied as people's faces. Unfortunately, a few fly wildly into extreme and fanatical situations that are not good for them or anyone associated with them.

If we were to rank-order all those associated with the Church according to “Mormon zeal” we might find a normal distribution curve something like that shown in Figure 2. Note that Group 1 members typically lie to the right of the “norm” since, as noted, most LDS members do not participate regularly. However, Group 1 folks are not the most zealous: those I will refer to as extremists or fanatics.¹

Does Mormonism spawn more than its share of religious extremists? Most of us will recall non-Mormon outliers like Jim Jones and David Koresh, but are there a proportionate number of extreme Jews or Catholics? We regularly hear of Latter-day Saints who feel they are called to be the Prophet. Are there Catholic extremists who routinely demand to be Pope? Do fanatical Jews regularly pop up claiming to be the Messiah? I'm not certain there are not, for perhaps they exist

but just don't get the media play or stick in our collective LDS subconscious the way our home-grown extremists do.

In this column, I explore a couple of questions. First, among those who move beyond the LDS Borderlands, why do a few become religious zealots, extremists, or even outlaws? Second, what might we do to avoid such outcomes? Reviewing the history of a few recent extremists might offer some answers to both questions.

A GREAT DEAL of attention has been paid recently to the Elizabeth Smart abduction story and her dramatic recovery Brian David Mitchell, who upon leaving the Borderlands morphed into “David Emmanuel Isaiah,” is an extreme example of someone whose journey beyond Mormonism was full of turmoil and mental instability. By all accounts Mitchell was once a card-carrying, Group 1 Mormon. But he developed personal problems with the Church that somehow could not be overcome with help from his friends, family, routine prayer, nor common sense. Eventually, as we know too well, Mitchell came to see himself as above and beyond all other members, including the Prophet himself. Although he was excommunicated from the Church, he still considered himself to be an important part of the latter-day Restoration initiated by Joseph Smith.

Mitchell had several traits common with others who have become Restoration-related fanatics. He believed that God was working solely through him, that all who disagreed with him were wrong, that converting people to his way of thinking was important, that “lost” parts of the gospel were to be restored through him (e.g., polygamy, blood atonement), and that breaking the law was acceptable in pursuit of his goals.

CHRISTOPHER FINK'S EXPERIENCE is also instructive. He fled the Borderlands, and following a revelation he received in 1998, eventually tried to form his own movement. Like Mitchell, Fink received revelation “for the Church,” criticized LDS leaders, tried to convert people to his thinking, and eventually broke the law. Unfortunately, his strange dietary beliefs almost resulted in the starvation of his twenty-month-old baby. After fleeing the police and a society that rejected his extreme views, he was eventually caught and sentenced to jail for child abuse.

How did it come to this? The young Christopher Fink began going with his mother to the Mormon church after she separated from her husband in 1983. She and her husband later divorced, and she took

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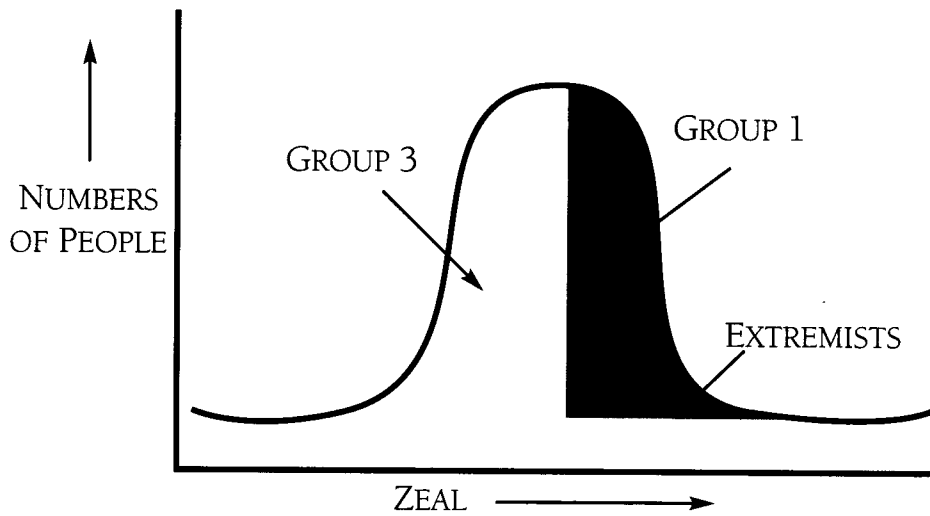


Figure 2

Christopher to live in Salt Lake City. By all accounts, Fink was active in the Church and a true believer. His beliefs turned extreme in 1995 when he broke with the Church over its policy of accepting the option of abortion in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother. Fink created a website that promised "plain truth in regard to all things" and criticized modern-day Mormonism as too lax.

IN ANOTHER CASE, Cody Judy jumped onstage at a 1993 BYU fireside devotional and held Apostle Howard W. Hunter hostage. Thousands of student attendees saw Judy carrying a briefcase he claimed held a bomb. Judy demanded that Elder Hunter read a letter proclaiming Judy the new president of the Church. Elder Hunter refused, and the nervous crowd sang hymns during a ten-minute standoff that ended when a group of students rushed the podium and subdued Judy. He was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison but was released in 2000.

How did this young man become a fanatic? Again, the answers are not entirely clear but seem to be related to emotional or mental health problems. In an interview with KSL-TV, Judy said the incident was an aberration caused by temporary depression over personal problems. He eventually accepted parole to a halfway house, agreeing to complete a mental illness treatment program.

RON AND DAN Lafferty became well known to Utahns in 1984 when they ritualistically murdered Dan's sister-in-law Brenda and her baby daughter. Both embraced "blood atonement" and are now in prison for acting on that bizarre belief. Both had been excommu-

nicated from the Church because of their criticisms of its policies, doctrines, and leadership. Again, both at one time had been considered regular Mormons. Ron claims to have served in three bishoprics.

Why did it happen? There are no definitive answers, but their rapid journeys beyond the Borderlands apparently began with their excessive interest in polygamy.

ONE OF THE most notorious and extreme acts of LDS zealotry occurred in 1978 when another "Immanuel David" (apparently popular cult names, reversed in this case) killed himself. The next day, his wife threw their seven children and herself off the tenth floor of a downtown Salt Lake City hotel. Motives for her suicide and murder of her children are not entirely clear, but one surmises Rachel David was obeying her husband's directive.

BASED on these stories, and returning to my first question—"Why do some Mormons become religious zealots and extremists?"—some common threads in their personal histories appear to be broken homes, unreasonable fear, feelings of not being accepted by the group, religious frustration, mental instability, and personal rigidity. Another commonality is problems with Church authority and control. Some cannot submit to authority while others, like those who blindly follow the zealots, seem to desire to be completely controlled.

Another reason Mormonism may hatch extremists is because of its unique and wonderful principle that Latter-day Saints have the ability to receive revelation for themselves. This Restoration teaching that we are

able to communicate directly with Deity, when it runs amok, might be the major contributor to the creation of LDS extremists.

It is difficult to know with any precision whether it was mental or emotional problems versus theological or doctrinal disagreements that led the foregoing Saints' to break with the Church and fall into fanaticism. So in what follows, I will focus instead on the issue of someone's religious maturity. This is a more general category, but one with greater potential helping us understand how we might help others steer clear of extremism or avoid becoming extremists ourselves.

In 1981, James W. Fowler wrote an enlightening book that may offer some clues. In *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Fowler suggests we may all be grouped into one of six "faith stages" through which we move as we mature.² According to Fowler, personal faith (perhaps including "testimony" in LDS thought) is a continuum, stretching like a series of slopes and plateaus from sea level to the misty heights of the tallest mountains, with six grand steps where people tend to congregate. Fowler has found that few people inhabit the final two stages, to the last of which he assigns such persons as Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa. However, Fowler's first four faith stages are crowded. And Latter-day Saints of all shades will recognize themselves and others on one of the plateaus, or struggling up the rocky trails between stages.

Stage One faith is a fantasy-filled, initiating phase, usually experienced only in early childhood, where a person is permanently influenced by the examples, moods, stories, and symbols of visible belief systems. The taboos, participatory habits, cultural expectations, and symbolisms of the religion are formed at this stage. Fowler's description of an adult stuck in Stage One faith will be recognized by many LDS people (but with uneasiness):

For every child whose significant others shared religion in ways that proved life-opening and sustaining of love, faith, and courage, there must be at least one other for whom the introduction of religion, while equally powerful, gave rise to fear, rigidity, and the brutalization of souls. . . . [This often results] in the emergence of an adult with a very rigid, brittle and authoritarian religious personality.³

In Stage Two, a person—again usually during his or her youth—moves beyond Stage One and appropriates stories, morals,

and symbols into his or her life but usually in a one-dimensional, literal way. Beliefs are incorporated into life with literal interpretations, as are moral codes and attitudes. Sacred and historical “stories” become a major means of giving unity and value to experience. Adults who never move past Stage Two see the world as based on reciprocal fairness and justice: blessings are predicated on obedience; misfortunes derive from sin; life is a formula. The inherent limitations of literalness and excessive reliance upon reciprocity as a principle for constructing an ultimate environment can result either in an over-controlling, stilted perfectionism, or in their opposite—an abasing sense of badness embraced because of mistreatment, neglect, or the apparent disfavor of significant others. Some traits attributed to adults caught in Fowler’s first two faith stages certainly reflect behavior of the LDS zealots described earlier.

Stage Three is characteristic of many Group 1 Church members. Its structure is influenced strongly by interpersonal relationships. It is a “conformist” stage wherein persons are acutely tuned into the expectations and judgments of others. The Stage Three person has adopted a cluster of beliefs and values but rarely reflects on or examines them as a system. They are the water she swims in, the lenses through which she views and judges the world. Authority rests in worthy others such as parents and church leaders. Stage Three persons have achieved a comfortable outlook and strong personal identity.

Stage Four faith is characterized by the tensions of (1) group definition vs. individuality, (2) subjectivity and unexamined feelings vs. objectivity and critical self-reflection, (3) living for others vs. the quest for self-fulfillment, (4) the importance of absolutism vs. the uncertainty of relativism, and (5) the willingness to live by faith. In Stage Four, religious symbols lose their literalness and are translated into conceptual meanings. The self, no longer sustained mostly by others, adopts an independence in reactions, interpretations, and judgments of external and internal events. Authority and responsibility pass from others to self. People at Stage Four feel conflicted, see irony in life, experience the pulls and tensions of different points of view and often (for the LDS) struggle with “testimony.” These traits are not inconsistent with many Latter-day Saints who migrate into the Borderlands and beyond (but not including fanatics and extremists.) Stage Four is where I locate myself, mostly.

The peace and new stability of Stages Five and Six are much harder to achieve. In de-

scribing Stage Five, Fowler uses such idealistic descriptors as “alive to the paradox and truth of contradictions . . . unifies opposites in mind and experience . . . commitment to justice is freed from the confines of class, nation, religion, and community.” Stage Six is said to be characterized by “perfect love, lack of division, universalizing faith, being heedless of threats to self,” and other idealizations.

So what might we do to avoid the creation of LDS fanatics? If we can trust Fowler’s-stages approach, we might help avoid future extremists and fanatics (at least in our own families and wards) when we assist our children and others to move through at least to Stage Three while they are becoming young adults. Then if they find themselves in the Borderlands or beyond, they may have a better chance for a suitable, positive outcome. Perhaps more generally as a church, we could avoid the “loss” of some members if loyal Stage Four members were more readily accepted into Group 1. Unfortunately, in the minds of many Group 1 members, a Stage Four faith seems unacceptable, frightening, and even threatening. As we discussed in earlier columns, Borderlanders also share some of the responsibility for making themselves better understood, and therefore less challenging, to those within Group 1. Perhaps approaches and descriptions like Fowler’s categories can be valuable in this area as well.⁴

I WILL explore the possibilities of sustaining an acceptable Stage Four personal LDS religion in a future column. In my next column, I will update “Stephen’s” love story and share some of your responses to his dilemma.⁵

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

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NOTES

1. Such generalizations as this distribution curve won’t work for all individuals. For instance, we can easily imagine an active Group 1 member with practically no religious zeal. So take this figure with a large grain of salt.

2. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

3. *Ibid.*, 132.

4. Fowler suggests most “faith communities” establish limits as to how far up the faith stage ladder it expects its members to climb. Patterns of nurture and instruction prepare children and youth to grow up to the acceptable stage—but not beyond it. This level of development becomes a sort of “center of gravity” that encourages those below it to reach up while at the same time discouraging others from moving beyond it. And converts are attracted to various churches based on their acceptable developmental level. Fowler writes that most organized religious groups in the United States adopt Stage Three as the acceptable ceiling level. This would also appear to be true of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

5. For Stephen’s story, see “Explorations of Openness,” *SUNSTONE* (Dec. 2002): 56–59.



LEAVING

Who can breathe such a word!

Its letters are the same
that have always dried to stone

—it’s not easy to drown, the throat
coats with soot: a gutted raft
that is not a cliff, drifts

as if its name was broken off
—just *Goodbye*, the word
doesn’t have you to hold close

and hurry off with, trembles alone
the way even a lifeless stone
will reach into the torn sea floor

send up its ripples
wider and wider for a place
to rest and nothing will burn.

—SIMON PERCHIK