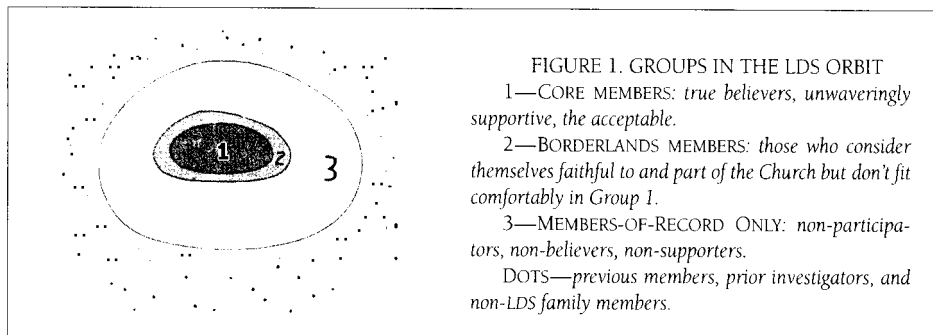


## BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

# “STEPHEN’S” STORY CONTINUED

By D. Jeff Burton



**T**HIS COLUMN UPDATES an earlier one (“Explorations of Openness,” SUNSTONE, Dec. 2002) which related the poignant story of “Stephen” who was dealing with a common dilemma for all Borderlanders: how honest and upfront can or should we be with Group 1 “true believers?” And when we are, what responses are we likely to get?

A summary of that column: Stephen is a typical Latter-day Saint in his mid-twenties, lives in the Northwest, has served a mission to Ireland, holds a bachelor’s degree in accounting, works in a professional job, and is unmarried but was then in a serious relationship with a Group 1 LDS woman.

About a year ago, Stephen learned things regarding Church history that were new and very troubling to him, and he struggled over how to deal with them. As he studied, his previously unquestioning testimony began to falter, but he hoped prayer, study, and discussions with his priesthood leaders might help him regain his rock-solid foundations. Meanwhile, he hadn’t shared this new development with his serious girlfriend, hoping to protect her innocence and being fearful that sharing might jeopardize the relationship.

Early in his discussions with me, he raised several important questions:

- “Should I refrain from talking about some things, so as to not challenge faith, even at the expense of a loving relationship?”

- “If my wife-to-be’s faith is to follow [the Church] in all things, should I let her believe that I agree with this . . . in order to pre-

serve our love and relationship?”

- “Is it okay for me to say less than I know and feel [e.g., in a temple recommend interview], and perhaps even appear to agree with something I’m not comfortable with in order to preserve my relationships?”

- “Am I too fringe in my thinking to ever hope for a marriage relationship with a Mormon woman? Should I look elsewhere, or can I continue to hope to find an understanding woman in the Church?”

- The most touching thing he related is, “I am burdened with feelings of sadness [and] I’ve felt so alone with what is happening. My worst fears (having my struggles and doubts affect my relationships with loved ones) are coming to pass.”

Stephen eventually shared his concerns and faltering testimony with his local leaders and girlfriend. His local leaders seemed unsure and seemingly unsympathetic, and his girlfriend ultimately ended their relationship.

Later, Steven shared with me a story about attending a meeting in another church at which a man stood and said he was struggling to believe in God but still wanted to live a good and decent life and to associate with others who want the same. The man was readily accepted and fellowshiped at his church: he was there for human contact and understanding and was not judged or shunned because of his struggles. Stephen wondered why he (Stephen) didn’t seem to be accepted the same way at our church.

**M**ANY readers of that column responded with comments and suggestions. When Sunstone editor, Dan Wotherspoon, learned I was planning this follow-up column, he forwarded several letters to me rather than running them in the “Letters to the Editor” section. The following is a sampling of comments from these letters as well as communications directly with me:

- “Your story about ‘Stephen’ caught my eye and brought emotions upfront. I believe from my own and others’ experiences that further study will only increase the substance of his doubts. I certainly hope he is exposed to others who will give him support and their own perspective. [Drawing from] my own experience, he has a painful journey ahead if he ‘pretends’ to be part of the mainstream.”

- “[Stephen], you indicate that your girlfriend is a person with ‘tender feelings.’ It is admirable that you have been sensitive to her feelings. This is a great quality and one I’m sure she recognizes as part of what she’s looking for in an eternal mate. I believe this is a valuable quality that should be acknowledged and not taken lightly. Jeff suggests that she is looking for a man who is ‘largely cartoon.’ Your girlfriend is seeking a mate with high ideals, goals, and principles. You just may well be that ‘standard, ideal,’ eternal husband she, or any other woman of high standards, is looking for, and there is nothing of fantasy or of humor in this.”

[JEFF’S NOTE: I must apologize for using the words, “largely cartoon.” I meant “largely cardboard,” which has an entirely different connotation: “one dimensional” as opposed to a cartoon’s “silliness”—but even that might be a weak choice of words.]

- “I am concerned [Jeff’s] counsel was influential in the decision to ‘break up’ and stopped your searching out the possibility of what might be an eternal relationship. I’m glad you took the advice to see your bishop. I’m sorry that things didn’t work out the way you wanted them to in those interviews. Even so, I believe this was of great value. Try not to let your judgment of your bishop’s counsel keep you from seeking the truth about Joseph Smith in a spirit of true ‘openness.’”

- “I really believe the Church should encourage [thought and open discussion] because the Mormons don’t realize how much they have going for them!” [From a non-Mormon.]

- “Yes, Stephen, there are some [faithful LDS women who will accept you] out there, but they are not easy to find. One problem may be that people of a mind like us are often

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in transition—either all the way out or back in—and are kind of a 'moving target.' I found such a woman in the Religion Forum of Compuserve, Section 13 (LDS)... We have been married more than three years now and are quite happy."

- "Stephen, this is a message of encouragement to tell you that you are on the right track and [that you] should keep following the promptings that direct you towards truth. A truth-seeker must be pure in heart. That is a virtue extolled in the scriptures that is hard to find today. Unfortunately most people tend to pussyfoot around the truth, including those at Sunstone who will go just so far but no further."

- "Stephen, rather than choosing to live in the . . . borderlands and categorizing or labeling yourself and other members of the Church and those of differing beliefs, it may be helpful to you to think of every person on this earth, including you, traveling bravely along the same wonderful spiritual path but at different places along that way, each one having different and unique spiritual experiences in learning, obtaining, and living by truth."

- "I see in Stephen's words the same self-pride and ego that I have indulged in. I see in his view—that Joseph Smith's polygamy experiences were inappropriate—cultural conditioning and a reflection of his attitude that he (read: the world) is right about how things should be."

- "Stephen . . . is troubled by his perception that Church members are less understanding than those of other religions, and that they don't get real in their interactions with each other. There may be some truth [in that], but that doesn't mean Church principles are wrong, only that members are not practicing them very well. My humble suggestion to Stephen is to get really honest with himself before trying to be 'open' with the bishop and ward members."

- "I know what it's like to want the right kind of companionship and not have it. Cozying up to Mormonism only to get that, however, is not the answer. . . . Being true to who you are will attract those you would desire to have a relationship with. Stephen should be a Mormon because he believes it is his best path to knowing and loving God and thus knowing and loving himself. I wish him well."

THESE are pretty strong responses and suggest the depths of emotional involvement some SUNSTONE readers have with these issues. Thanks to you who took the time to thoughtfully respond. (Keep your correspondence coming!) I sent these reader responses to Stephen for his review. He commented (partly) as follows:

I really don't think I could have kept my . . . struggle from [my girlfriend]. I would have felt too phony trying to put up a front as far as Church things go. She really deserves to have the kind of man she has always hoped for from a Church standpoint, and I hope she finds what she is looking for. I would have "killed" myself trying to be that for her. One of my regrets is letting the relationship go on as long as it did before I talked to her about my struggles. I kept hoping to find a way to "fix things," but that only led to more hurt for both of us. I can't speak for all cases, but I did think that the best way to deal with my situation was to work towards being open and honest with those who ought to know (loved ones, Church leaders). It's too bad this is such a difficult and threatening thing. . . .

Things with [my girlfriend] appear to be at a certain end. I hope she is well. I feel terrible that I have hurt her. She is wonderful woman and deserves all she hopes for.

My family hasn't seen the SUNSTONE article. I'm still not quite sure how to deal with my family. They know something is going on, but I haven't really discussed it with them. I've been getting letters from siblings containing testimonies and encouragement. I'm not sure how to respond, other than "Thanks for your love, concern, and thoughts." I'm just stalling at this point and probably will continue to do so until some event forces an explanation (such as a relative's temple wedding).

Please don't worry that [you,

Jeff] caused the break-up. I can assure you that was not the case. I feel quite responsible for that. I appreciate your helping me sort out my feelings and just listening to my concerns. You were the first person I talked to that didn't tell me I had a problem which needed fixing or that I was being influenced by Satan. It was a big relief just to be able to talk freely and feel understood. I appreciated your helping me explore various ways of looking at the situation and suggesting ways of dealing with it. I felt comfortable accepting (or not accepting) the things we discussed.

Actually, if I were going to spread any blame around, I'd point to the Church. It's just not enough to be a decent person in this church. You have to continuously profess belief and testimony (through the temple recommend interview process) to really be accepted. For those who can't do that, but still want some wholesome association and acceptance, it's a rough ride (in my experience so far).

I re-read a portion of James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* recently. Near the end of the book, he was discussing the responsibilities (or at least his vision) of [religious] institutions. He said something to the effect that "institutions should provide a means where all the stages of faith can be experienced and/or discussed (in private if necessary) without judgment or condemnation." Something like that. Hmm . . . that would be nice.

Amen.

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

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