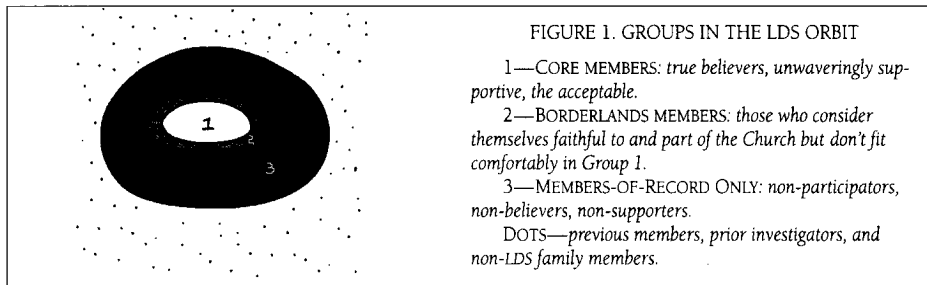


BEING HONEST WITH OTHERS ABOUT OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES

By D. Jeff Burton

APRIL 2008



IN THIS COLUMN, I share a recent exchange of messages with “Susan” (not her real name), a newcomer to Sunstone discussions.¹ I’ve changed a few biographical details in order to help keep her identity private.

SUSAN: I am a student, twenty-four years old, and have been a member of the Church for a little more than nine years. Discovering the mind-broadening power of the Book of Mormon converted me to the Church. The Mormon teaching that “truth is everywhere” is a liberating principle that has been central to my religious journey.

Before I joined the Church, I was blessed to be able to attend many churches where I learned many great truths. I feel so fortunate to have had these experiences. I carried many sacred truths and practices with me into my new life as a Latter-day Saint. I don’t see a conflict between these and my new-found beliefs.

A few weeks ago, I was having a hard time getting into the spirit and mindset of prayer, so I grabbed an old copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* to help facilitate that spirit. A neighbor guy came over to see my roommate. As I was clearing my things from the living room, including my book, he looked at me and said “Oh, are you not a member of our church?” I told him that I am a member. He said, “Oh, your typical LDS person doesn’t use a prayer book.”

There have been so many times during my membership when I have had this type of

interaction—one that makes me feel like I should apologize for who I am. My conclusion: I guess I am just not “typical.”

I don’t think Heavenly Father sent any of us here to be typical. I know I did not join this Church because I was interested in fitting stereotypes but because I loved my Heavenly Father and I felt this was the best place I could serve him and reach my highest potential.

I am so glad that Sunstone is here, because it helps me feel like maybe even I can have a niche in the Body of Christ and find new truths. I also want you to know that your description of the Borderlanders is something that I have wanted to put into words for a long time. I’m probably in the Borderlands with you.

How do members and priesthood leaders view being involved with Sunstone?

JEFF: As for what members think about Sunstone, if you were to ask them, I think you’d find that many won’t know what you’re talking about, others will think it is just fine, and some might lift an eyebrow. Sunstone has had former mission presidents, stake presidents, and bishops on its Board of Directors, and I have been corresponding with a bishop in Tooele who reads the magazine because he has “Borderlanders” in his ward and wants to understand them better. I myself recently completed a two-year LDS service mission. So, don’t be too concerned. All walks of Mormon life are happily involved with Sunstone.

In your message, you said that “the mind-

broadening power of the Book of Mormon” converted you. What do you mean by that?

SUSAN: Thanks. I am really glad to have the opportunity to discuss these things. Most of my attempts to do so with my peers have resulted in blank looks. Maybe those blank looks are warranted, or maybe my experiences are just reflective of being in Utah or being in a singles ward.

I appreciate your answering my question about what a bishop’s perspective might be. I am certainly not taking an interest in Sunstone because I have an axe to grind with my bishop (or anyone else in the Church for that matter), but I was interested to learn if the bishop would want to take my temple recommend away or something like that.

What I meant by the “mind-broadening power of the Book of Mormon” is this: I am a convert to the Church. All my life I was taught that the Bible is all there is. Then, I started taking the discussions, and for a while, the Book of Mormon was actually pretty scary. I was fifteen years old, and I told the missionaries that I knew if I read that book and found truth there, then my life was going to change, which was a really intimidating thought.

The mere existence of the Book of Mormon challenged me out of my comfort zone. I believe that it teaches true principles, but I wrestle with the claims as to its origin. (That is something I never discuss with anyone. You are the first.)

Discovering the Book of Mormon was like the scene in the *Wizard of Oz* in which the world changes from black and white to color. The Book of Mormon taught me to not place limits on how God may speak and to stop putting him in a box. Also, it specifically teaches that anything that testifies of Christ is of God, regardless of where it is found. That teaching relieved me of great cognitive dissonance that I had felt as I’d searched other churches.

Not only could I stop putting God in a box, but I could also stop putting people in boxes. Further, it is the Book of Mormon that has inspired my catholic (lower-case c) approach to spirituality, seeking truth wherever it can be found.

What causes me confusion is that I feel that doing this is doctrinally sound as far as the Church is concerned, but it is seen as very strange among most members I interact with. They don’t seem to understand it the way I do.

JEFF: Thanks for the explanation about the Book of Mormon. That is a nice approach to

"The Book of Mormon has inspired my approach to spirituality, seeking truth wherever it can be found. What causes me confusion is that I feel that doing this is doctrinally sound as far as the Church is concerned, but it is seen as very strange among most members I interact with. They don't seem to understand it the way I do."

life—searching for truth wherever it can be found. Keep in mind that truth and factuality are often not the same thing.

As I see it, the Book of Mormon holds a lot of "truth," but the common understandings of its origins may not be entirely "factual." Also, one person's truth is not necessarily another person's truth when it comes to human thought and behavior. So I suppose truth is, in some respects and at some times, in the eyes and ears and minds of the beholder. But as you say, we should respect every other person in his or her religious journey and for the truths other people hold dear (for themselves).

Unfortunately other members are not likely to be as accepting of us as we would like them to be.

SUSAN: Thank you for making that distinction between truth and factuality. I do have some questions as to the "Sunday School version" of the origins of the Book of Mormon. But, for some reason, at church, there is this huge need to emphasize, "the Book of Mormon is true, the Church is true, and Joseph Smith was a true prophet." It seems as if we hang onto those phrases like a child who refuses to part with her security blanket. I think those phrases make us feel safe.

I suppose I don't believe that the Church is "true" in the Mormon sense of things because of my emphasis on the Church as a social structure. I liked what I read in your column about the Church being "good." I agree with that, and that makes it "true" for me.

JEFF: Your approach to things reminds me of "Kristen's" story in the December 2007 Borderland column. Perhaps you might find a fellow traveler there.

SUSAN: Thanks. I have now read that column featuring Kristen's experiences. I am so pleased that she has a husband who is united with her on their journey of faith as a family. I admire them both because if I ever get married, I would want my marriage to be based on mutual respect for the other person's spiritual needs, even if they don't fit the mold.

What impresses me about Kristen is that

she seems to have some of the same needs as I do, but she is honest about them and acts to find ways to get them met. It sounds like she and her husband found strength at the Methodist church.

Like her, I too went to another church for a couple of years when I lived in Orem. I went to St. Mary's Episcopal Church—and it was wonderful. I felt I learned much about the character, personality, and complexity of Christ and his teachings. It was a place of unconditional acceptance and fearlessly candid dialogue.

My bishop actually was highly supportive of my experiences there. He received a great deal of criticism for (in the words of my home teacher at the time) "letting me go to another church." He was open-minded enough to ask, without rushing to some sort of judgment, what it was I was finding at St. Mary's.

Like Kristen, there have been seasons of my life when I felt like I needed a short break from church attendance in order to focus more on deepening my relationship with God. I am approaching one of those seasons again, which fills me with some apprehension. When you don't show up to church for a few weeks, the "attendance crisis management team" (e.g., visiting teachers, home teachers, Relief Society presidency) comes to help you in your "time of need."

The irony is that during those times, what I *need* is space. Do you have any ideas on how I can tactfully explain that I am not in need of help? Is this kind of "mother-hen" mentality pretty isolated to singles' wards, or does it happen often in family wards, too?

JEFF: I don't have any specific suggestions on how to explain your need for space to your ward members except to just be honest about it. Maybe a reader will email me with some good suggestions, and I'll forward them to you.

SUSAN: Something new. I have suddenly been presented with an opportunity to reconcile with a man I dated for a year and a half. To be honest, although I am not rushing into anything, I am really excited about the possibilities. We are working on rebuilding trust and are in the process of reviewing cer-

tain patterns of the past, identifying lessons learned, and discussing the development of healthier communication between us.

Like me, this man is a Borderlander. The most crucial element of our relationship that makes the process worthwhile is our spiritual connection and compatibility. He is a man who also refuses to put God in a box. With him, I can grow at my own pace, use the things that work for me to help me draw closer to God, and be open to detours in my spiritual journey without the fear of putting my relationship with him in jeopardy.

In a conversation with my roommate, a good friend for the past two years, I mentioned that I was thinking of renewing my relationship with this ex-boyfriend. She gave me what I can only describe as the "deer in headlights" look.

Immediately she asked: What about the gospel? What about temple marriage? What about raising your children in the Church? She asked these questions so fast that I wasn't sure which one to tackle first.

So, I took one of the deepest breaths I have ever taken. I communicated honestly with her that being married in the temple is not as important to me as it is to be married to a man with whom I am spiritually and emotionally compatible. I told her that it is more important for me to teach my children to ask questions, explore a variety of spiritual paths, and choose for themselves than it is to raise them within a particular church. (My theory is that Heavenly Father gave his kids free agency, so I see nothing wrong with giving it to mine.)


She asked me if I had ever gotten a witness that this is the only true church, and I admitted that in ten years, I have not (which has not been for lack of trying). She asked about the temple endowment, since I had been endowed during the last year. She asked if I believe that the temple is a path to God rather than *the* path to God, and I said that the former would be a fair assessment of my feelings.

I told her that while I wholeheartedly believe many teachings of the Church, I cannot claim to know that Joseph Smith is a prophet. As much as possible, I tried to answer the questions she asked without going

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off on tangents. I saw no reason to lay it on thick.

She told me that she was grateful for the clarity, that so much of what she had seen and heard from me that had bewildered her now made sense. But she then asked me why I had kept “secrets.”

I explained that I have never made false claims of knowledge or belief just to sound good in testimony meeting. I said that I have never seen a reason to attempt to impose my perspectives on any other member of the Church, that it has not been a matter of keeping secrets.

She asked about my temple recommend interview, and I said that I had answered the bishop’s questions as I understood them and had been forthcoming with him.

Since our conversation, my roommate has given me the silent treatment, and she has accused me of still being “secretive.” That baffles me, because to my understanding, the purpose of the Church is not to put everyone’s individual beliefs under a microscope.

This was the first time I have ever been this candid with anyone in my environment about my beliefs, and I am not sure what to expect from here on. As far as it is within my control, I will simply try to keep the peace with others.

This incident has only caused me to further wonder if the message that I send by

being active in the Church is, by default, dishonest.

JEFF: Thanks for sharing your latest experiences with the challenge of honesty.

Yes, our actions send messages that sometimes can be misleading. Others can interpret strong church activity as a sign that a person is a “true believer.” And some do allow others to make such interpretations. How this all will shake out at the Day of Judgment I’m not sure.

A complete view of “honesty” and “truth” recognizes that they are often not matters of “rightness or wrongness” nor of facts that can be labeled “black or white” but are more of a continuum. It takes work and thoughtfulness to approach the “whole truth” of most matters that affect human behavior and thought.

Let me give you a thought experiment: Suppose your roommate asked you why you attend church. If you were to be completely honest, you might say, “Well, there are a lot of reasons. I’d have to think about it to give you the complete answer, but these thoughts come to mind: We are asked to attend—maybe even commanded for some meetings. I usually learn something new about how to live my life better. My friends are there. I want to keep my temple recommend. It feels good to be thinking about Jesus and how he would live if he were here in my shoes. I would feel guilty staying home. I am afraid that if I didn’t attend, I might not get certain blessings. I like the quietness of the meetings. And finally, I suppose, it has become a habit.”

Approaching honesty in this complete and thoughtful way allows us to see ourselves more clearly and encourages us to make positive changes in our lives based on the full reality of our different—even if competing and not really rational—desires and motivations. This is the ideal way to approach being honest and is one with which you have become quite acquainted recently.

But, again, for various reasons, staying “in the closet” about one’s beliefs and motivations is also a common practice among Borderlanders. It is often safer and easier. For some, and at some times, secrecy may be the only open option.

Coming out to “True Believing Mormons” about our Borderlander status can be traumatic, and the responses we receive are sometimes surprising, sometimes dismaying. You’ve taken a courageous step towards openness and honesty, and I’m confident that it will work out in your favor. As William Morris has written, “Honesty is the best policy” for the long run.

For now, I would simply treat your

friends as you always have and, after the shock and fright wears off, they will likely come around. Who knows, your roommate may have subconscious issues that were brought to the level of emotional distress when she heard your honest views of the Church. Perhaps you shook her worldview of how things should be.

SUSAN: Things have smoothed over a bit at home with my roommate. I don’t think that things will ever be completely the same, but the air isn’t as thick. I have tried to show my friend that I am the same person I always was—the only difference is that now she knows something about me that she didn’t before.

For many of my friends, Mormonism is all they have ever known. Were they to deviate from the mainstream, it could likely cause problems in many of their families, especially between them and their parents (who, in some instances, still have some say in their lives, especially because of financial support). I feel saddened when I am talking to my friends and hear phrases such as, “I could never tell my parents . . .”

That never happens to me. There isn’t a thing I can’t tell my mom. My relationship with her is more like that between two adult female friends than between a parent and child. She has never been LDS and doesn’t really care one way or the other if I stay in the Church. All she cares about is that I am happy with my choices.

In my childhood, the idea of there being “one true church” was a foreign notion. I was taught that the whole world of options was open to me. Who am I to say that, had I been raised as they were, I would not think and feel the way they do?

I am certainly not saying that all LDS parents are people who would not unconditionally accept their children, because I know for a fact that that is not true. But, I also know that if many of my friends were to explore other options, even other ways of being LDS, their relationships would be negatively affected.

I think I am a very fortunate lady! ❧

NOTE

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-eighth), 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 at WWW.FORTHOSE-WHOWONDER.COM.