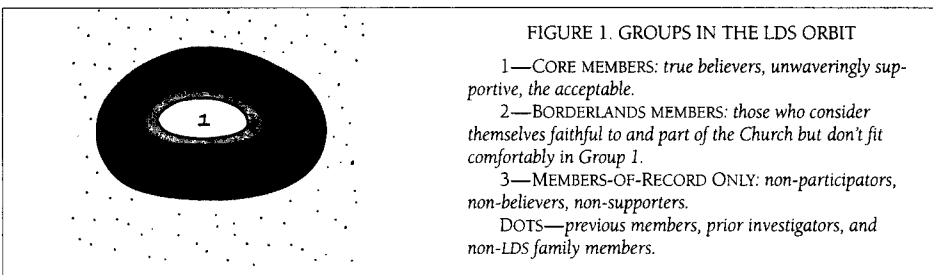


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

# ANONYMOUS CONFESSIONS OF AN LDS WEBMASTER

*by D. Jeff Burton*



**I**N THIS COLUMN, I share excerpts from my exchanges over the past few months with Bill (not his real name), the founder of the website MORMONTHINK.COM, which attempts to present in a fair and balanced way both sides of difficult LDS historical issues.

**BILL:** As an avid SUNSTONE subscriber, I enjoy your Borderlands column. I guess I'm a Borderlander, and my story might interest your readers.

**JEFF:** Okay, please begin by answering our standard questions.

I then sent Bill my questionnaire, to which he responded as follows.

*Describe your upbringing in the Church.*  
 My family was converted by the missionaries when I was about six, although my father did not join the Church. I have always been an active member, although not exactly a "Peter Priesthood." I was married in the temple.

*What is your current status in the Church?*  
 I am active and attend most meetings (although I don't worry about it if we take a Sunday off and spend the day as a family at the park or something). I teach a Sunday School class. But I no longer attend the temple.

*What caused you to move into the LDS Borderlands?*

One day a trusted, knowledgeable friend told me that he no longer believed that the Church was true. I was shocked and asked why. He told me about many historical problems that I had never encountered, so I decided to do my own detailed study of Church historical issues. I concluded that much of what we've been taught in church is simply inaccurate or misleading.

*Why do you stay in the Borderlands (as opposed to moving on)?*

I think the Church has value for me and my family even if it may not be 100 percent true. I am comfortable in Group 2 but tend to drift into Group 3 as I continue to learn about issues that trouble me and that I cannot reconcile with the beliefs I've always had growing up as a member of the Church.

*How did your study of Church history affect you?*

I was very distraught when I started learning these things. At first I felt as if my entire world had collapsed. Spiritually I wondered how God could allow this to happen.

*How do you cope?*

I try to separate the good the Church can do for me and my family from whether or not it's really the "one true church." This usually works pretty well, but sometimes it's difficult—like when someone in a meeting says something I know is wrong. If I give a correc-

tion everyone looks at me as if I've done something wrong.

*How open and honest are you with others about your situation?*

I waited about two years before I told my wife. I wanted to come to some conclusions before I told her. I have also discussed things with some family members and ward members, but for the most part, I keep this to myself. I have discussed a few of these things with my bishop, but I think his knowledge of these issues was really limited, so he simply dismissed everything we talked about.

*Why do you keep it secret?*

I have seen how some others who "come out" are treated. Most Latter-day Saints seem to think the problem is with the person rather than the disconnect between what is taught and what the research says. Unfortunately some people assume that those with questions have committed some sort of sin and that the historical issues are just an excuse for their wanting to live an immoral lifestyle or something. I've also seen other nonbelievers somewhat ostracized for their lack of testimony.

*What would it take for you to be honest and open with others?*

First of all, understanding. Second, the willingness of my LDS friends and family to accept the possibility that I may be correct without immediately dismissing my arguments. I found that it is most constructive for me to talk with people who are willing to look at the same information I have—and most active LDS are unwillingly to look at "unapproved" sources.

*How did your experience affect others close to you?*

My wife was very troubled at first. I think she wished I would stop going down this path. My mother was afraid I would stop going to church all together. One good LDS friend was troubled by my research at first but managed to reaffirm his faith. Another good LDS friend was very disturbed. He was probably afraid he would lose his testimony completely. Some of my relatives really don't like it when I talk about religion. They probably think I'm not doing the right thing.

My wife eventually examined the issues troubling me, came to her own conclusions, and is now very comfortable with my views. My mother discusses the issues with me often, and we try to reach common ground. The first LDS friend I talked about is very supportive, and we debate these issues fre-

quently in a friendly manner—although we hold totally opposite views. I lost the other good friend by telling him of my doubts. Although he agreed with my facts and, to some extent, my conclusions, he no longer associates with me for fear of jeopardizing his own testimony. Some relatives simply avoid discussing any aspect of the Church with me.

*What about your children?*

We have two children ages seven and three. A boy and a girl. They are too young to know about any of my concerns. They are typical kids who don't like going to church, anyway, and we usually have to drag them along. As they get older, I plan to help them go over the things they learn at church, and, when I feel it's necessary, "correct" any errors in what they have been taught.

Probably the biggest issue I have with my children is deciding what to do with them at baptism time. Part of me wants to baptize them into the Church just as I was baptized. But I'm torn because I want to spare them the pain that I went through when I discovered that the Church isn't all it claims to be. Also I worry that others who know I don't believe in the divinity of the Church may see the decision to baptize my children as my admission that the issues I've been wrestling with are somehow unimportant.

*What does your personal religion look like now?*

I am very open-minded on religion but much more skeptical. I have to shy away from bishop's interviews and anything else that would "out" me. So I guess I'd say that I'm not a full-fledged, temple-going member. This works for me now, but it's not always easy.

*What would you suggest to other members now having the same experiences you've had?*

Try to find supportive people outside your ward with whom you can be totally honest. I found it helpful to have dialogue with people with differing views—those who fully support the Church, those who are critical, and those in between.

*What do you believe you will do about this in the future?*

I'd like to participate in the Church as long as I feel comfortable. I would not want the Church to be absent from my life. I've been a member too long to simply abandon it completely. But I know I will never be able to view it with the same rose-colored glasses I used in my younger days.

*What would you like the Church to do about the things that brought you into the Borderlands?*

Ideally I would like the Church to acknowledge that there are historical issues that trouble many Latter-day Saints. If the Church had an official outlet for members to vent their concerns without fear of reprisal, I would really appreciate that. I would also like the Church to stop referring to faithful critics as "anti-Mormons."

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JEFF: Tell me more about your website MormonThink.com.

BILL: After being introduced to the historical problems, I spent about three hours every day for three years studying these issues. I went back and forth between supporting the LDS apologists and supporting the critics. It was a very intense time. But I found that, in their zeal to "prove" they are right, both sides are guilty of making errors and misrepresenting the facts. I decided, partly as a form

of therapy, that I would gather all points of view and put them on a new website. So on the site, I include the critics' arguments and faithful LDS responses. I then add my own thoughts.

My ultimate aims for the site are to share all that we know about an issue and then let people do what they want with the information. I want to educate and support those who stay in the Church and make the Church a better place for people like me. When all is said and done, I really want us to remember that the Church is about people and service, not history. It's okay to be a cafeteria Mormon and accept the Church for what it is.

JEFF: Congratulations on not falling off a cliff when you first started dealing with your problems. What has the response been to your website?

BILL: The response has been overwhelmingly positive. I receive many thankful emails. Even those who write to say that they disagree with the information "on the other side," say that they respect the fair way I present it. They like the fact that we link very generously to both critics and defenders of the faith.

JEFF: I am wondering about the "Our Thoughts" sections at the end of each topic covered on your website. Who writes and reviews the "our thoughts" portions? Why do you feel the need to provide your own conclusions when your stated goal is to simply provide people all the background data and various approaches and points of view?

BILL: Initially I didn't have the "Our Thoughts" section, but some readers thought



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the website wasn’t “making a point.” Also I have taken so much time organizing the research and views of others that I feel like I have a few good opinions to offer. So now I approach the people who contribute to MormonThink, get their opinions on particular issues, and craft a summary that takes into account our common views. Besides that, I think people should know about any bias I have on each topic.

JEFF: Do any of the apologetic sites link to yours?

BILL: Our website links to all the faith-promoting websites such as FAIR, FARMS, SHIELDS, the official LDS page, and others, but none of these sites links to ours. Someone at FAIR recently wrote me to correct something on our website—which I gladly did—but they don’t want to take input from me. We at MormonThink want everyone to look at all of the credible information out there, even if we don’t agree with it. But it seems as if the apologists only want people to look at their information.

JEFF: That’s their role—to present the positive view. How do regular “true believers” respond to the website?

BILL: We get emails all the time from faithful members. Some will try to convince us that the faithful arguments we present are too weak, and when we agree with them, we strengthen them. We want the strongest arguments from both sides, so we will update them accordingly. I invite anyone with strong arguments not already included on the site to help us punch up our existing arguments. I am especially interested in hearing faithful members responses to the critics’ arguments.

JEFF: Why is your website anonymous?

BILL: I’m afraid I might be excommunicated if it were common knowledge that I owned it

Jeff: Why? I’ve had the FORTHOSEWHO WONDER.COM website and the “Borderlands” column for some time now, and no one has suggested that my membership could be in jeopardy because I present viewpoints other than the official ones.

BILL: I’m not entirely sure why I maintain the secrecy—maybe the Lyndon Lamborn case spooked me.<sup>2</sup> I wrote to him, and he said that he gave someone his research, and that person must have gone to his bishop, which eventually led to his excommunication. Now some people like you and John Dehlin have been open about their sites, and nothing has happened to them. So I’m not sure.

I’m also worried about coming out just yet because I feel my family would be treated poorly if people found out about my activities. I live in a neighborhood teeming with LDS families. We often have social get-togethers, and our children play together. I consider all these people my friends. If they knew that I didn’t have a real testimony and knew things about the Church that are very damaging (regardless of whether these things are true or not), I fear they might start excluding us from the social group. Although I personally can handle that, I don’t want my children to be ostracized.

JEFF: We all look forward to the day when you’ll feel comfortable about being completely open with everyone in the church. ☺

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

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## NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-ninth), 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 free at WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

2 Lyndon Lamborn is an Arizona man who was excommunicated in August 2007 following his queries into LDS history, which were prompted by a co-worker’s questions about things she’d read in John Krakauer’s book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*. A newspaper account can be found at: <http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/98035?cp=59%23comments%20%3Chttp://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/98035?>

