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Posted by u/dice1899 7 months ago

Part 2: Manipulation Techniques in the CES Letter & How to Avoid Them

discussion

Entries in this series (note: this link does not work properly in old Reddit):
<https://www.reddit.com/r/llds/collection/11be9581-6e2e-4837-9ed4-30f5e37782b2>

Intro: In response to some comments from earlier installments, I wanted to get a few things out of the way up front. Yes, I will be addressing the content/questions of the letter in future installments. Be patient. No, I am not personally attacking Jeremy Runnells and no, reading his back-and-forth with the CES director in question would not change my opinion, because I never claimed that he didn't contact the CES director. My claim was that his public façade was belied by his private comments.

In [Part 1](#), I used his own words and timelines to show that he was telling one story to the general public while telling quite a different story to his friends on the exmormon subreddit. I did that in order to show that the entire premise the letter, a public cry for help from a floundering member who desperately wanted to save his testimony, was false. In fact, Runnells was already mentally out of the Church, trying to devise the best way to lead away the rest of his family, and actively helping others push their own family and friends out of the Church, as well. That information is important because it sets the stage for what follows. When you know that the entire thing is based on a lie, and that it was specifically engineered to be as manipulative as possible, that helps you gauge the truthfulness of the document itself. I made no accusations or judgments on the man, only his contradictory words.

And lastly, I will not link to the letter itself, Jeremy's website, or the exmormon subreddit, and ask that others do not do so in the comments. As always, follow the sub's rules (which includes discussing these things from a faithful perspective and not applauding the letter, as well as treating others with civility), or your comments will be removed and you may potentially earn a ban. This subreddit is for believing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If you can't respect that, have the decency to stay out of the conversation. Thank you.

Previously, I explained what a "gish gallop" was and how the letter is a textbook example of that technique. This kicked off multiple threads in the exmormon sub about how it wasn't, which I admit amused me. (I'm occasionally petty; I'm working on it!) The fact is, when you look at the definition of the term, it matches the CES letter exactly.

To restate for anyone who missed last week's installment of this series, a gish gallop is a debate/manipulation technique in which one person overwhelms another with "a rapid series of specious arguments, half-truths, and misrepresentations in a short space of time, which makes it impossible for the opponent to refute them all... In practice, each point raised by the 'Gish galloper' takes considerably more time to refute or fact-check than it did to state in the first place."

[RationalWiki](#) elaborates on this technique: "Although it takes a trivial amount of effort on the Galloper's part to make each individual point before skipping on to the next (especially if they cite from a pre-concocted list of Gallop arguments), a refutation of the same Gallop may likely take much longer and require significantly more effort (per the basic principle that it's always easier to make a mess than to clean it back up again)."

It's specifically designed to produce an emotional reaction and make the person being inundated by information panic. In German, this is called *dokumentenschock*, or "document shock." It's when you get so overloaded by information that your brain simply shuts down and stops processing, because you're so overwhelmed you can't concentrate and you just don't know how to proceed. Your mind blanks because it doesn't know what else to do.

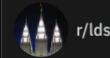
Later in the article, [RationalWiki](#) also explains, "**The strength of the Gish Gallop is in its ability to create the appearance of authority and control. The Galloper frames the debate and forces opponents to respond on their terms. The Galloper wins by making the point that their opponents have failed to disprove their arguments sufficiently or completely enough for their satisfaction. Their goal is not to win on the facts, but to minimize the time and effort they need to expend to achieve maximum apparent credibility, while ensuring that opponents expend maximum time and effort in rebuttal for inconsequential gains. They want to drop a bomb into your lap and run away, telling you it can only be disarmed when they say it is, and that it isn't their job to tell you when it's disarmed.**"

In a [fantastic presentation given in 2019](#), René Krywult quoted an ex-LDS anthropologist named Manuel W. Padro, who explained, "**This tactic of intentionally luring Latter-day Saints into a situation where they are bombarded with questions they don't know how to answer is a documented tactic used by these groups** ... and even before it was documented, it was clearly going on. ... When I was a kid, the Lighthouse Ministry and CARM (the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry) were the two big groups using this strategy. Now Mormon Stories, the Life After Ministry, Mormonthink and a number of other groups are all relying on the same abusive tactic. **They are trying to coerce you into a situation where they can bombard you with so many doubt-provoking questions that they can cause your resolve to collapse and your identity to fall apart.** Inside of that vacuum, created by an act of psychological rape, they hope to impregnate you with their own belief system. ... **If that sounds abusive, it's because that's what it is.** It's an extension of the cultural legacy of the Inquisition. **They can't torture you, but they can humiliate you and pressure you with questions you don't have an answer to yet. They try to hit you up with too many of these questions to answer, because if they don't, it wouldn't work.** That's how the CES letter works. It's garbage, but it's a common strategy in the anti-Mormon ministry."

Krywult goes on to explain, "If you want to overwhelm someone with mass, each argument per se is irrelevant. As long as you have the word count and enough question marks, you will reach your goal. But if the reader really takes apart one argument after the other, nothing remains."

Another technique used in the CES letter is the fallacy of [ad hominum circumstantial](#). It says that "unofficial apologists" and others responding to the CES letter from a faithful source can't be trusted because they believe in the Church's truth claims. Therefore, the only people equipped to properly respond to the CES letter are former members or those who have renounced the Church. No one who is a faithful member is unbiased

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former members of those who have never joined the Church. No one who is a faithful member is unbiased enough to respond.

Obviously, this is a ridiculous premise. Who else can better understand our history and beliefs? We all hate it when someone tells us what we're meant to believe. You wouldn't go to a gardener to ask what an astronomer studies, so why would you go to someone who was never a member of the Church to explain what Latter-day Saints actually believe?

Other fallacies present in the document are the [appeal to authority](#) (defaulting to what scholars say, rather than addressing the actual evidence presented); [appeal to the majority](#) (also called the Bandwagon fallacy — "Most of the world doesn't believe this, so why should we?"); [appeal to emotion](#) (manipulating someone's emotions to win an argument); [appeal to flattery](#) ("Only the intelligent people will accept what we're saying," i.e., "If you'd only study the Church's history, you'd disbelieve it, too!"); [appeal to ridicule](#) (distorting someone's beliefs to make them seem more absurd, a favorite tactic of anti-Mormons everywhere — "Latter-day Saints think they'll get their own planet someday," "They believe that Jesus and Satan were brothers," etc.); [accusations of contradiction](#) (i.e., "Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's prophets are today's heretics"); [wishful thinking](#) (asserting that what the author hopes is true is actually true, i.e., "There's no evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon"); [appeal to novelty](#) (as if the CES letter was the first of its kind or unique from any other anti-Mormon tract of years past); [argument from fallacy](#) ("The CES director couldn't answer my questions, so therefore, the questions don't have answers and the Church is not true!"); [argumentum ad nauseam](#) (repeating the [same things over and over again](#), as if that would make them true); [false dilemma](#) ("If you can't thoroughly explain every single thing we say, the Church can't be true"); [double standard](#) ("The Book of Mormon can't be the word of God because there were clarifications and corrections made in later editions!" despite the fact that the CES letter itself has been published in multiple versions with numerous corrections, additions, omissions, and clarifications); [false premise](#) ("The Book of Mormon introduction used to say that the Lamanites were the ancestors of all Native Americans, but DNA says they weren't, so the Book of Mormon can't be true!"); and allegations of [cognitive dissonance](#) (i.e., "There are intelligent people who believe in the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, but only idiots would believe that, so [their testimonies must be the result of cognitive dissonance!](#)").

In addition to all of these, the letter also employs a lot of charts and tables, because people tend to look at the entire list of entries on the chart, rather than the actual content and arguments being shown, and they think there must be some legitimate arguments if that list is so long.

However, that isn't true, as I'll outline in later segments. A prime example is the list of city and town names Joseph supposedly stole for the Book of Mormon from nearby cities and towns in his vicinity. This list has been debunked many, many times, and will be a pretty fun section when we get to it. In fact, Jeremy Runnells knows it's ridiculous, and asked the exmormon subreddit whether he should take it out, alter it with a disclaimer admitting that it's weak, or leave it as is. [There is a screenshot of that here](#). He ended up leaving it basically as is, with a few of the most egregiously bad arguments removed, because other members of that sub liked it.

Another thing you often see in things like this is the overstating of credentials. We're all used to that. People show up on these subs and say things like, "I was born in the Church and served a mission and held these callings and married in the temple, and..." Runnells does that in his letter several times. How could he, someone who did all of those things, be blindsided by the information in the letter?

Well, that's simple. Everyone has different experiences and everyone studies different things and has different teachers. Some people were taught all of these things while growing up, and others weren't. I was taught in Primary that Brigham Young and Joseph Smith both had multiple wives. Others weren't. That doesn't mean the Church was hiding it, it just means their Primary teacher either didn't know about it or didn't think to teach them that the way mine did. Some people love reading history and theology, and others think that's boring. Someone who studies Church history for fun is going to find out a lot more of these answers than someone who only thinks about the Church's history while he's actually in Church meetings.

In his presentation, Krywult gave some tips for navigating this misinformation and manipulation:

- Calm Down
- Check What You Can Check
- One Point at a Time
- Don't Become Consumed

When you're studying and you come across information you didn't know before, stay calm. If you're feeling overwhelmed and in shock, take a break. Find something that helps you restore peace, whether that's praying, reading your scriptures, or vegging out over Netflix or a video game, it doesn't matter. Just take a break until you can calm down and look at things rationally, rather than at the height of emotion. Krywult recommends not reading things like the CES letter when you're tired, hungry, ill, or angry, because it'll just exacerbate your feelings of shock. Wait until you're in a good headspace to address the issues.

There's so much going on in the letter, and so many questions bombarding you, that the best thing to do is to approach it logically. Check the things you can easily check. While the letter has a lot of things in it that many members haven't heard before, some of it is familiar. Some of it is about things you already know. If you already know about something, you can go over that topic more easily and less emotionally than you would something else. That gives you a good foundation for proceeding with the rest of it.

Check the sources you've been provided. Are they valid? Are they all biased in the same direction? How does the letter address the sources? Are they quoted accurately, or does the author take some liberties? If so, how do those liberties alter the source material's take on the issue?

When you're overloaded with information, the best thing to do is to take it all one point at a time. List them out and rank them according to priority, and deal with the most pressing ones first.

Evaluate it — what about the claim is true or not true? What does it mean if it's entirely true? How does it affect my testimony if it is? This is exactly what I did when I was a kid and I first learned about Joseph putting his seer stone into a hat during the translation process. I realized it didn't matter in the slightest, because it doesn't change anything for me. I still believe the Book of Mormon was translated by the power and gift of God. I still believe that it's an ancient record of people who really lived. I still believe it's another testament of Jesus Christ. I still believe that the doctrine contained inside is true. Does the translation method really matter to me? Nope, it sure doesn't. If anything, it makes it even more impressive to me, for reasons I'll go into more when dealing with that section of the letter.

Analyze those claims — what is Runnells claiming? What are the known facts? What can you find about it? Hunt down everything you can find about that particular topic, and read about it from a variety of sources and slants. Then, pray and figure out what *you* believe about it. Don't listen to his opinion, or mine, or anyone else's. Listen to the Spirit. Don't move on to the next issue until the first is resolved in your mind. Krywult once had an issue that took him three years to resolve. I had one that took me six months, but in the end, I walked away with a stronger testimony, and so did he.

And don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by this search. Make time for other things and prioritize your health and your family time. You have time. You don't need to find answers immediately. You don't have to

make a decision right away. That's one of the manipulations of the letter, and of the Adversary: they make you feel like you have to make an immediate decision. **That is not true.** You can take the next 20 years to decide if you want. That pressure is imaginary. You can ignore it. You can bat it aside and buckle down and do your studying at your own pace. You can take your time and do it thoroughly.

[Michael Ash](#) gives some more things to remember:

- It's easier to make an accusation than it is to refute an accusation
- Smart people don't always agree with one another
- The strength of evidence is often a matter of interpretation

It's okay to disagree about whether or not something is convincing. Different people have different experiences, as I said. What's convincing to me won't always be convincing to you, and vice versa. That's okay. It's all part of the journey we're each on, to discover our testimonies for ourselves.

[Consider the narrative](#): who's speaking, and what's their motivation? Are they trying to build up your faith, or tear it down? What does the speaker get out of it? What end result are they trying to help you achieve?

Remember the [parable of the Sower](#). A sower tosses out his seeds without care, and some fall on the wayside with no soil. Some fall on rocky ground, some on thorny ground, and some on good soil. In three of the four cases, the seeds fail to grow because they weren't planted in the right soil. That's true of our testimonies. Make sure your testimony is planted in good soil. Make sure you have that firm foundation, and if you don't, search out the answers to the questions that are making that foundation wobbly. Search out that good soil, and plant yourselves there.

Develop your own emotional, intellectual, and spiritual maturity. Don't rely on what information someone else is feeding you. Search it out for yourself, and rely on your Father in Heaven and His Holy Spirit. Consider each question prayerfully, and search your scriptures. Lean on Him to help you through those mists of darkness, because that's what He's there for. Learn to understand that things aren't always black and white, and history is messy and full of gaps in our knowledge. Ask God for understanding and clarification, and ask Him to point you toward the resources you need to find. I promise you that He will lead you to the answers. It might not happen immediately, but it *will* happen. He did it for me, and He'll do it for you. Just slow down, take your time, and work through it methodically and patiently. The answers *will* come.

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I am so thankful to see resources like this!


When I was 17 I left the church; my testimony was not strong enough to withstand my transition into the "real-world". For 7 years I hated all religion and cut myself off from even the possibility of Spirituality. I especially loathed the cult I was born into (Mormonism).

I am now 26 and last Sunday I partook of the Sacrament for the first time in over 9 years. During my spiritual hiatus I had no intention of ever coming back to the faith. And yet the Good Shepherd left the 99 to come find me, the 1.

I am overwhelmed by the beauty of Truth in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ - it causes me to tremble with Awe. Thank you for encouraging a faithful examination of our doubts! If we pursue a relationship with the Holy Ghost we will be lead to the place where Gods mysteries unfold and an unshakeable Testimony is formed.


Edit: This sub is my favorite on Reddit because of the wonderful people! thanks for sharing some saintly love with me you guys 🙏

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You're making me tear up. 😭

15 Give Award Share Report Save

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Thanks for your reply! I'm so glad this part of my journey touched you (:

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 StAnselmsProof · 7m

But I was told this could never happen . . . !

6 Give Award Share Report Save

 seethruspiritlady · 7m

Haha I thought it was impossible too! It is a hard path to walk... but all of heaven is on our side (even if we don't believe).

2 Give Award Share Report Save