

The CES Letter Rebuttal, Part 1: The Dishonest Origins of the CES Letter

August 18, 2021 by [Jeff Markham](#) — [Leave a Comment](#)

By Sarah Allen

Editor's note: This post is part one of a series of responses to the criticism presented in the Letter to a CES Director widely circulated online. This rebuttal was originally posted on a faithful online community on Reddit. New sections of the rebuttal will be posted each Wednesday

Introduction and Overview

This series will offer a faithful perspective on various sections of the CES Letter and share some resources where people can go to start researching the answers to their questions. A good starting point would be to explain a little about [what the CES Letter is](#) and how it came to be, along with pointing out why its author, Jeremy Runnells, has been dishonest about his journey from the beginning.

The letter is a prime example of a debate/manipulation technique called a ["gish gallop"](#), in which someone uses "a rapid series of many specious arguments, half-truths, and misrepresentations in a short space of time, which makes it impossible" for the other person 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."

Unfortunately, it's true that the letter takes far more time and energy to refute than it does to read. This has the ability to overwhelm the reader and make it feel impossible for them to answer all of the questions. This was done by design.

Another technique the letter uses is [repetition to reinforce its ideas](#). We've all heard the saying that if you repeat a lie enough times, it starts to become the truth. That's what the letter is attempting to do.

In the opening paragraphs of the letter, Runnells claims that he's searching for answers to his questions and is hoping a CES director can help save him from his doubts and restore his testimony. That is a lie.

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Contemplating the "Complete

Dishonest Origins

The following information is taken from [u/Senno Ecto Gammat](#) in [this comment](#) and [u/LatterDayData](#) in [this blog post](#). Their work links to the exmormon subreddit comments and to Runnells' website, which I will not link to on this sub. If you want to source the things I'm saying in this section, you can find them there, along with additional information that didn't make it into this post.

In a post on the exmormon subreddit dated November 15, 2012, Runnells states that he had already left the Church a few months prior, that he was worried about the Church brainwashing his kids into believing its truth claims and turning them against him, and that he wanted to find "the most effective way to save them from Mormonism."

This was five months *before* he first posted the letter to Reddit on March 26, 2013.

However, on his website, Runnells states that the letter wasn't written to overwhelm anyone or destroy anyone's testimony, and that he simply wanted to restore his own testimony and resolve his questions, doubts, and concerns.

If he didn't want to overwhelm anyone, why would he use known manipulation techniques specifically designed to overwhelm people? And in the same breath, he claims he doesn't want to destroy anyone's testimony, but is posting on the exmormon sub that he wants to "save" his children from Mormonism and brainwashing by "the so-called Church." He claims he wants to restore his own testimony, but is posting about how he left months before and wants to lead others away.

Contradictory Claims by the Author of the CES Letter

The following quotes were taken from the original letter and were read at Runnells' disciplinary council, which he recorded immediately after signing a statement saying he wouldn't record it (because he'd recorded and shared all of his other disciplinary meetings):

"Delusion is believing when there is an abundance of evidence against something. To me, it's absolute insanity to bet my life, my precious time, my money, my heart, and my mind into an organization that has so many serious problematic challenges to its foundational truth claims."

Yet, in that same council, he claimed, "Yes, my position in 2015 is that the LDS Church is based on a foundation of fraud but I was still wrestling with figuring things out 2 years ago when I was approached by the CES Director."

If he was still wrestling with figuring things out, why had he already left the Church? Why was he advising people to share his document with as many others as they could? Why was he claiming that believing in the Church is "delusion" and "absolute insanity"?

As Senno lays out, the original version of the CES letter used more combative language and was far more angry in its approach. The version that is published in book form today has been softened and recalibrated to appear more sincere and questioning. It's more manipulative on purpose. Runnells himself says on his website that he was looking for "a softer tone" and a new subtitle.

[Bibliography of Hugh Nibley](#) (CBHN)

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The original subtitle of the letter in 2013 was “How I Lost My Testimony.” In 2015, he crowdsourced the new subtitle “My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts” from the exmormon subreddit.

When rewriting it in 2015, he claimed the following:

“ It all started with questions. I needed official answers to those questions. This desire for answers and truth eventually led to a CES Director crossing my path. He asked for those questions and I gave them to him. He promised answers but those answers never came. To my bewilderment, these questions went viral and later became publicly known as the “CES Letter”. ... Unbeknownst to me at the time, a lot of people liked it and started sharing it with family and friends.

And in a letter to his Stake President on March 7, 2016, he claimed that:

“ [T]he CES Letter went viral online because of other people who also share the same questions and concerns I do, independent of my involvement.

However, the same day he posted it on Reddit, March 26, 2013, he also included a Word doc download of the letter and encouraged others to “make it their own” and to share it with as many people as possible. How is that “independent of his involvement,” “unbeknownst to him,” and “to his bewilderment” when he’s the one providing downloadable copies and encouraging everyone to share it with as many people as they could?

A Plan to Lure In and Deceive the Unsuspecting

Additionally, on September 17, 2013, he explained on the exmormon sub that he put his questions about the Book of Mormon first in order to “hook” readers and draw them in, because posting his problems with Joseph Smith first would “doom” his letter. If he didn’t intend it to go viral, and he doesn’t want it to destroy anyone’s testimony, why would he specifically organize it in such a way that it draws the reader in, “hooks” them, and doesn’t “doom” the letter’s public chances for success?

And why did he go on to say on Reddit on November 2, 2015, that “the target audience are the fence sitters”?

In a letter to his Stake President on 03/07/16, he claimed that he was only offering translations of the letter on his website because readers had offered him translations they’d made on their own.

However, on 05/16/14, he asked for a Spanish translation to be made, because “Spanish is the second largest language in the church.”

In that same letter to his Stake President, he says that his website should not in any way be construed to hurt the Church or its members.

But on 12/08/17, there was a post on the exmormon subreddit by a teenager who no longer believed in the Church and was asked by his parents why. He was wondering whether he should share the CES Letter with them, because it was in large part what “led his shelf to shatter.”

Runnells responded to that post, first saying that he wouldn't normally advise sharing the letter with parents like that, but because they asked, it created the opportunity. He then said the following:

"The key here is to not be the direct bearer of bad news. Do not be the guy telling them about polyandry this, Book of Abraham that, Kinderhook Plates this. Let the Church and me be that guy. I'd introduce them to the Church essays first.... Once that door is opened, feel free to share CES Letter with them. The power with doing this is that it protects you from being the 'anti-Mormon out fighting the church'. You just point to me and my questions and ask them to help you resolve them because you can't get those questions out of your mind.

As [u/LatterDayData](#) points out:

"Jeremy advised this young man, who clearly indicated he had lost his testimony, to pretend that he wanted his parents to help him resolve the issues, playing on their parental instincts to help him because he "can't get those questions out of his mind" – all in order to manipulate his parents into getting sucked down the rabbit hole.

He advised a kid how to lie to his parents and try to manipulate them into leaving the Church with him. And yet, this is from someone who claims that he's "not trying to hurt the Church or its members."

This is getting long enough, so I'll save the rest for the next post. Just be aware that [there are multiple manipulations, half-truths, misrepresentations, and outright lies](#) in the CES letter. I'll be addressing many of those in future installments.

This letter has drawn numerous other responses and rebuttals that I recommend:

<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2019/fear-leads-to-the-dark-side>

<https://thirdhour.org/blog/faith/ces-letter/>

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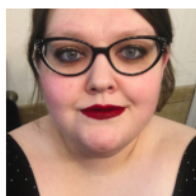
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<https://www.timesandseasons.org/harchive/2014/10/letter-to-a-ces-student/>

<https://mormonpuzzlepieces.blogspot.com/2015/07/answers-to-ces-letter-questions-and.html>

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLw_Vkm1zYbIHqtOJe70CrJyAMf7fvBftZ



Sarah Allen is brand new in her affiliation with FAIR. By profession, she works in mortgage compliance and is a freelance copyeditor. A voracious reader, she loves studying the Gospel and the history of the restored Church. After watching some of her loved ones lose their testimonies, she became interested in helping others through their faith crises and began sharing what she learned

through her studies. She's grateful to those at FAIR who have given her the opportunity to share her testimony with a wider audience.

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