

The CES Letter Rebuttal, Part 1

August 25, 2021 by [Jeff Markham](#) — [Leave a Comment](#)

Part 1: Manipulations & Dishonesty in the CES Letter

BY SARAH ALLEN

Editor's Note: This post introduces a long series of rebuttals to the CES Letter. New parts will be forthcoming on this blog. You may notice this post is largely the same as the post that appeared last week. This post is an updated version of the Reddit post specifically updated to appear on this blog. The original Reddit post was loaded inadvertently. We appreciate Sarah's effort in preparing this excellent rebuttal.

On Reddit, I'm a moderator at the LDS subreddit or forum. While I had heard of the CES Letter and had read it years ago, it wasn't until recently that I began to realize just how prolific it was. So many of the comments and questions we were seeing on our subreddit were influenced by the Letter. I knew of popular responses to it by [Jim Bennett](#), [Michael Ash](#), [Brian Hales](#), [Scott Gordon](#), and [an entire section here at FAIR](#), and I often referred questioners to those responses. At the same time, I noticed that many of those replies only provided brief overviews of the issues or were somewhat light on cited sources. There was room for a detailed response full of citations and sources showing the readers where to research the answers for themselves. I felt impressed to try my hand at filling that space myself, and also felt that, because the CES Letter was crowdsourced and born on Reddit, a comprehensive reply should also come from Reddit. That's where I began this series, and FAIR has kindly offered to host them here as well.

When I prayed about how best to start this series, I felt strongly that it should start by highlighting the manipulation techniques and dishonesty of the Letter itself and of the Letter's author, Jeremy Runnells. I'll dive into the content of the Letter next week, but this week, I wanted to lay some groundwork.

If you understand that he misrepresented his story and told one thing to the public while saying something completely different to his friends on the Exmormon subreddit, and that he specifically organized the Letter to be as manipulative and overwhelming as possible, it helps you put the Letter's questions and accusations in the proper context. This first post is not meant to be an attack on Jeremy's character. It's merely meant to show that he's not "just asking questions," the way he's claimed. It's 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 and helps you gauge the truthfulness of the document itself.

I'd like to start by explaining [what the CES Letter is](#) and how it came to be, and then I'll move into some of the manipulations found in the Letter and in the responses by the Letter's fans.

To begin, 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. The Wikipedia article further states:

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

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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."

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.

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 continued, "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."

In the opening paragraphs of the Letter, Jeremy 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 misleading. I'm not saying that he didn't deliver a copy of his letter to a CES director. I believe that he did. But the evidence I'm about to lay out shows that he was what is referred to in some circles as "PIMO"—physically still in the Church, but mentally out of it. He had already made up his mind it wasn't true and, while he was still technically a member of the Church at that point, he had already left in his heart and was already working to lead others out with him. He was not hoping this CES director could answer unanswerable questions. He was lashing out, the same way he did several months earlier with his angry [Letter to Elder Quentin L. Cook](#), posted to the Exmormon subreddit on October 9, 2012.

The following information is taken from [a comment made by Reddit user Senno_Ecto_Gammat in the Latterdaysaint subreddit](#) and [Ryan Larsen of the Mormon Puzzle Pieces blog](#). Their work links back to the Exmormon subreddit comments and to Runnells's website. 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 stated 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 one month after his open letter to Elder Cook and five months *before* he first posted the CES Letter to Reddit on March 26, 2013. However, on his website, he claimed that the CES 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 claimed he didn't want to destroy anyone's testimony, but was posting on the Exmormon subreddit that he wanted to "save" his children from Mormonism and brainwashing by "the so-called Church." He claimed he wanted to restore his own testimony, but was posting about how he'd mentally left months before and wanted to lead others away.

When rewriting the Letter 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 copy of the Letter and encouraged others to download it, "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?

Additionally, on September 17, 2013, he explained on the Exmormon subreddit 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"?

He deliberately arranged it to draw in as many people as possible and publicly declared he was targeting the spiritually vulnerable. This is not someone who is innocently "just asking questions."

The following quotes were taken from that original copy of the Letter (which has since been rewritten) and were read at Jeremy's disciplinary council two years after the Letter was first posted, 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 publicly declared he'd 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 Ecto Gammat 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.

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. This makes the unsuspecting reader believe that he was still searching for answers when the Letter was written and gives them a reason to read it.

You see, the original subtitle was keeping many believing members of the Church from reading his document because they didn't want to read criticisms of the Church they loved. But sincere questions from a struggling member are a different thing because by nature, we all want to help when someone is struggling. So, these goodhearted members will read the document and become overwhelmed by the sheer amount of questions and accusations inside, and then their own testimony takes a hit. He changed the subtitle deliberately in order to weaponize their kindness against them.

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 work 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 wondered 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 Ryan Larsen 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.”

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. The more often you hear something, the better it sticks in your mind. You’ll see [the same phrases and same concerns repeated multiple times](#) throughout the Letter. Phrases such as “unofficial apologists,” “modern day Egyptologists say,” “the rock in the hat,” “Joseph’s *modus operandi*,” and more crop up numerous times each. In each section of questions and concerns, the author repeats many of the same issues several times over. He is conditioning you to agree with him because he repeats them so many times, they become familiar to you and you start to associate those terms with these concepts.

He and his supporters also employ the use of multiple fallacies to make their points. The fallacy of [ad hominum circumstantial](#) is a common one. The Letter 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. The implication is that no one who is a faithful member is unbiased enough to respond to these claims. Therefore, by default, the only people equipped to properly respond to the CES Letter are former members or those who have never joined the Church.

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 learn about astronomy, 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 or in its defenses 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.); [proof by contradiction](#) (quoting prophets and apostles, then giving claims that seem to contradict their statements); [presentism](#) (judging the past by today’s standards); [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 while also claiming to be the truth); [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!](#)”).

[Note: I don’t typically use Wikipedia as a source, but for things like this where I’m just trying to give a definition or broad overview, I will.]

In addition to all of these, the Letter also employs several lengthy 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 often isn’t the case, 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. In fact, Jeremy 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 forums and comment sections and say things like, “I was born in the Church and served a mission and held these callings and married in the temple, and…” Jeremy does that in his Letter several times. How could he, someone who did all of those things, be blindsided by the information he found?

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 they’re boring subjects. 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 or 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 will be familiar to you. 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 items 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 your 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. The fact that Joseph was able to dictate something so beautiful and [internally consistent](#) with his face buried inside his hat is remarkable to me.

Analyze those claims — what is Jeremy 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 tips 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. Search it out for yourself. Don't rely on what information someone else is feeding you. Rely instead 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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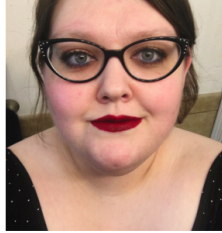
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Sarah Allen is brand new in her affiliation with FAIR. By profession, she works in mortgage compliance and is a freelance copyeditor. A voracious reader, she loves studying the Gospel and the history of the restored Church. After watching some of her 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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