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Conclusion

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CONCLUSION

“Mormonism, as it is called, must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a Prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground. If Joseph was a deceiver, who willfully attempted to mislead people, then he should be exposed, his claims should be refuted, and his doctrines shown to be false...”

– PRESIDENT JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, DOCTRINES OF SALVATION,
P. 188

“Amen to that! And thank heaven this is almost over.”

- JIM BENNETT, *A FAITHFUL REPLY TO THE CES LETTER FROM A FORMER CES EMPLOYEE*, 10/2018

SHORT CONCLUSION:

Jeremy, this is no longer “just asking questions” or an expression of personal doubt. You are now making money by means of the destruction of the faith of others. That is about as terrible thing as any human being can do. The Church and its members are worthy of so much more.

LONG CONCLUSION:

When I first responded to your letter, I didn't interrupt your conclusion much. I figured it was a heartfelt, personal summation of your personal faith journey, and I thought it appropriate to give you the benefit of the doubt and let you sum up your argument without me butting in.

If that's what the CES Letter originally was, it is nothing like that now.

All of the above arguments were crowdsourced in the ex-Mormon subReddit, and while you disingenuously present all this material as if it's all your own work, you haven't even bothered to read many of your own arguments. Whatever sincerity was present in your initial letter has been drained out by the cold, corporate faith-destroying machine that your organization has become. You are every bit as financially invested in your own apologetics as you accuse Latter-day Saints of being, if not more so. It is no use trying to perpetuate the flimsy “just asking questions” illusion when your very livelihood now depends on having none of your questions satisfactorily answered.

Once, you were a troubled Latter-day Saint who was reeling from information you didn't understand. Now, you now make a living, and quite a fat one, destroying the faith of others. You do so by means of terrible scholarship and deliberate misrepresentation. That approach does not deserve the benefit of the doubt. It deserves vigorous opposition, and that is what my reply now is.

In my first version of my reply, I cited the Christlike tone that Gilbert Scharffs used in his book *The Truth About the Godmakers* and promised to emulate that tone. I was criticized by many that I didn't succeed in that goal, even with that less confrontational version. You accused me of ad hominem attacks when none could be found. And while I am fiercely critical of your terrible scholarship, your plagiarism, and your ignorance of your own sources, you will find no ad hominem attacks in this version, either. I am not interested in calling you names or criticizing you as a human being. I am interested in vigorously standing up for the faith that you have made it your life's mission to destroy.

I will say, however, that I don't think my new, more confrontational approach in the letter is a departure from Christlike principles. Jesus had tremendous patience for sinners who were willing to repent. But he also called the Pharisees “whited sepulchres” that were “full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.” He drove the money changers out of the temple at the end of a whip. And he reserved his strongest language for those who deliberately attempt to destroy the genuine faith of his followers.

“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me,” the Lord said, “it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

I wish you no ill will, Jeremy. I also have no further interest in pretending that what you are doing is anything but profoundly wrong.

When I first discovered that gold plates were not used to translate the Book of Mormon...

And after all this, is it really so simple that this all comes down to the rock in the hat?

... that Joseph Smith started polygamy and disturbingly practiced it in ways I never could have imagined...

And ways which you misinterpret and misrepresent.

and that Joseph's Book of Abraham translations and claims are gibberish...

That word does not mean what you think it means.

I went into a panic...

Panics are irrational. Given that you thought the warm feelings you felt during *The Lion King* were confirmation of Mufasa's historicity, it's clear that whatever faith you had was based on some strange and irrational assumptions.

I desperately needed answers and I needed them immediately. Among the first sources I looked to for answers were official Church sources such as Mormon.org and LDS.org. I couldn't find them.

You should have begun by looking to God. Your assumptions of what the Church is and/or is supposed to be could have been tempered by genuine spiritual insight and a willingness to give the Church the benefit of the doubt. Instead, your first reaction was to completely turn on the Church and assume the worst possible interpretation of every troubling issue that came your way.

I then went to FairMormon and Neal A. Maxwell Institute (formerly FARMS). FairMormon and these unofficial apologists have done more to destroy my testimony than any anti-Mormon source ever could.

“If facts and truths can destroy faith...what does it say about faith?” - Jeremy Runnells.

I find their version of Mormonism to be alien and foreign to the Chapel Mormonism...

What on earth is “Chapel Mormonism?” This isn't a thing.

... that I grew up in attending Church, seminary, reading scriptures, General Conferences, EFY, Church history tour, mission, and BYU.

What you are saying here is that when your long-unchallenged expectations encountered challenges, you questioned the Church rather than questioning your own expectations. It never seems to occur to you that your expectations might be the problem, not the facts.

It frustrates me that apologists use so many words in their attempts to redefine words and their meanings.

Like “Chapel Mormonism,” for instance? Or witness conflicts of interest? Or legally binding witness testimonies? Or “gibberish” which isn’t gibberish? Or “lands of Joseph Smith’s youth” that include Keokuk, Iowa in your case? Or Egyptian scholars that are actually theatre musicians with no Egyptological background? Or sources you haven’t read that are cited to say things they don’t actually say?

I can see how that would be frustrating.

Their pet theories, claims, and philosophies of men mingled with scripture are not only contradictory to the scriptures and Church teachings I learned through correlated Mormonism...they're truly bizarre.

There’s plenty of bizarre on display in the CES Letter.

I am amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn't really mean translate...

You completely misrepresent what translation is, beginning with your very first objection about KJV version “translation errors,” citing a source that says nothing about the assertion you make.

... horses aren't really horses (they're tapirs)...

Which gives you license to gratuitously insult Daniel Peterson as “Tapir Dan” and completely misrepresent his position.

... chariots aren’t really chariots (since tapirs can’t pull chariots without wheels, steel isn't really steel, the Hill Cumorah isn't really in New York (it's possibly in Mesoamerica), Lamanites aren't really the principal ancestors of the Native American Indians...

All these things are theories, not definitive answers. The truth is that there is a great deal about the Book of Mormon we do not know. The insistence that everything be black-and-white and never subject to interpretation is the problem, not the theories themselves. And there is a great deal of evidence of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity that you discard out of hand because you’re upset about tapirs and chariots.

... marriage isn't really marriage (if they're Joseph's plural marriages? They're mostly non-sexual spiritual sealings)...

Hey! There it is! My last “sealings, not marriages, no sex” finally paid off!

... and yesterday's prophets weren't really prophets when they taught today's false doctrine.

Line upon line, precept upon precept. At no point have we ever been taught that all possible knowledge has been revealed. We welcome new knowledge from heaven, even if, or perhaps especially if, it corrects the errors of the past. When we resist new revelation as we cling to the past, we risk losing the knowledge we have.

"For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." (Matthew 13:12)

Why is it that I had to first discover all of this – from the internet – at 31-years-old after over 20 years of high activity in the Church?

Because you didn't bother to take responsibility for your own faith. You assumed that discipleship involved simply following orders, not gaining a personal spiritual witness that went beyond warm and fuzzy feelings from Disney cartoons.

I wasn't just a seat warmer at Church. I've read the scriptures several times.

And yet you didn't realize Joseph Smith was a polygamist? Was Doctrine and Covenants 132 not in your copy of the scriptures?

I've read hundreds of "approved" Church books.

There's that word in quotes again. What's an "approved" Church book? Despite your quotes, the Church provides no such designation itself. Are you referring to books published by the Church? Because outside of manuals, the Church itself only publishes a handful of books, including the Scriptures, *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith*, and now *Saints*. There aren't hundreds of officially "approved" Church books to read.

I was an extremely dedicated missionary who voluntarily asked to stay longer in the mission field.

More time to discuss the Three Witnesses (non) affidavits? You were apparently teaching people things that weren't in the discussions.

I was very interested in and dedicated to the Gospel.

Yet you were more interested and dedicated to your unquestioned assumptions than the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there was a different, more faithful way to interpret the information you were discovering.

How am I supposed to feel about learning about these disturbing facts at 31-years-old?

Probably embarrassed that it never occurred to you to engage with your faith beyond the kind of rote, unquestioning apathy that "Chapel Mormonism," whatever that is, was expecting of you.

After making critical life decisions based on trust and faith that the Church was telling me the complete truth about its origins and history?

How does the rock in the hat change your critical life decisions? That's the element to which you have taken the most offense, but from my perspective, I see no way in which that should have any bearing on any life decision you make, critical or otherwise.

After many books, seminary, EFY, Church history tour, mission, BYU, General Conferences, scriptures, Ensigns, and regular Church attendance?

How on earth is it possible that you lived through all that and still believed the Spirit was confirming the physical existence of cartoon characters?

So, putting aside the absolute shock and feeling of betrayal in learning about all of this information that has been kept concealed and hidden from me by the Church my entire life, I am now expected to go back to the drawing board.

No, you are expected to challenge your expectations. You are expected to consider the possibility that it is you, not just the Church, that has gotten a great deal wrong.

Somehow, I am supposed to rebuild my testimony on newly discovered information that is not only bizarre and alien to the Chapel Mormonism I had a testimony of...

Sorry, *what testimony?* A testimony requires a knowledge of truth. You clearly didn't have a testimony, as it shattered like glass the moment it came into contact with new information. A knowledge of truth doesn't do that. You can't keep using these terms as if they mean something they don't. And whatever "Chapel Mormonism" is, it's not the true Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

... it's almost comical.

It isn't. It's extraordinarily sad. You have chosen to not only abandon whatever faith you have yourself; you have devoted your life to making money by tearing down the faith of others. There is nothing even remotely funny about that.

I'm now supposed to believe that Joseph has the credibility of translating ancient records when the Book of Abraham and the Kinderhook Plates destroy this claim?

You're now supposed to believe that you've been given bad information on both those subjects.

That Joseph has the character and integrity to take him at his word after seeing his deliberate deception in hiding and denying polygamy and polyandry for at least 10 years of his adult life?

You got that seriously wrong and refuse to consider solid evidence to the contrary.

How he backdated and retrofitted the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood restoration events as if they were in the Book of Commandments all along?

That is the least generous interpretation of what happened that it is possible to have.

And I'm supposed to believe with a straight face that Joseph using a rock in a hat is legit?

sigh

This reply is right up against 140,000 words at this point. If we removed all references to the rock in the hat, it would probably be half as long.

Despite this being the exact same method he used to con people out of their money during his treasure hunting days?

No evidence that he conned anyone out of anything. The hearing where he was accused of this ended when Josiah Stowell, his supposed mark, testified on his behalf.

Despite this ruining the official story of ancient prophets and Moroni investing all of that time and effort into gold plates, which were not used because Joseph's face was stuffed in a hat?

140,021 words at this point.

I'm supposed to sweep under the rug the inconsistent and contradictory first vision accounts and just believe anyway?

No, you're supposed to recognize that you're seeing inconsistencies where there are none, and that your presentist assumptions about history are deeply, deeply flawed.

I'm supposed to believe that these men who have been wrong about so many important things and who have not prophesied, "seered," or revealed much in the last 170 or so years are to be sustained as "prophets, seers, and revelators"?

You are supposed to believe that they have gotten far more right than they've gotten wrong, and that no Church office requires the forfeiture of agency.

I'm supposed to believe the scriptures have credibility after endorsing so much rampant immorality, violence, and despicable behavior?

You took this section out of this version, but you still cite it here in the conclusion. Lousy scholarship.

When it says that the earth is only 7,000 years old and that there was no death before then?

It says neither of those things.

Or that Heavenly Father is sitting on a throne with an erect penis when all evidence points to it being the pagan Egyptian god of sex, Min?

Min is the god of fertility and harvest, not the “god of sex.” And you are expected to understand that symbols can be appropriated over time to mean many different things.

The “most correct book on earth” Book of Mormon going through over 100,000 changes over the years?

The addition of punctuation by an uninspired printer racks that number up pretty quickly. The Book of Mormon has not gone through any substantive changes that alter its meaning or its message.

After going through so many revisions and still being incorrect?

And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.” Again, that’s on the first page. The *first frickin’ page*.

Noah’s ark and the global flood are literal events?

Many members believe that, but none are required to. I believe the account makes no attempt to distinguish between the literal and the figurative, and there’s no point in trying to distinguish one from the other.

Tower of Babel is a literal event?

Many members believe that, but none are required to. I believe the account makes no attempt to distinguish between the literal and the figurative, and there’s no point in trying to distinguish one from the other.

The Book of Mormon containing 1769 King James Version edition translation errors and 1611 King James Version translators’ italics while claiming to be an ancient record?

You don’t understand your own accusation here, and you cite sources that do not say what you claim they say.

That there’s actually a polygamous god who revealed a Warren Jeffs style revelation on polygamy that Joseph pointed to as a license to secretly marry other living men’s wives and young girls and teenagers?

Wrong. Sealings, not marriages. No sex.

That this god actually threatened Joseph’s life with one of his angels with a sword if a newly married pregnant woman didn’t agree to Joseph’s marriage proposal?

Completely wrong. Joseph never once used the angel as a drawn sword as leverage to get anyone to marry him.

I’m supposed to believe in a god who was against polygamy before He was for polygamy but decided in 1890 that He was again against it?

You're supposed to believe in a god who announced in the Book of Mormon that monogamy is the standard but polygamy is the occasional exception.

I'm told to put these foundational problems on the shelf and wait until I die to get answers?

Who has told you to do that?

To stop looking at the Church intellectually even though the "glory of God is intelligence"?

No one has told you to do that. Your problem stems from the fact that you didn't bother to intellectually engage with the Church to any degree until you were 31 years old.

Ignore and have faith anyway?

Nobody has told you to do that.

I'm sorry, but faith is believing and hoping when there is little evidence for or against something .

It is not. Every action you take in life is an act of faith, and it is not only believers in the supernatural who exercise faith.

Sting has a song called "If I Ever Lose My Faith in You" where he renounces his faith in everything but the person to whom he's singing, presumably a friend or a lover. In order to have faith in that friend, Sting has had to have experience with them, and he likely has plentiful evidence that the person is reliable. Most of us only exercise faith in people or institutions where such evidence already exists. We deposit our money in reputable banks because we have faith that our savings will be safe there. We don't deposit money in JoJo The Monkey Boy's Savings, Loan, and Bait Shop because the evidence suggests that it might not be there for us when we come back to get it.

Notice that in each instance, no supernatural entity is involved. Faith is not simply a religious principle. If you don't have faith in God, then you have faith in something else. Militant atheists a la Richard Dawkins have enough faith in Darwinian processes that they insist random chance could have created the majesty of the universe. On that count, I remain a skeptic.

Delusion is believing when there is an abundance of evidence against something.

You have deliberately ignored an abundance of evidence, not just of the Church's truth claims, but of God Himself and his great love for you. That's not just a delusion; it's a heartbreaking delusion.

To me, it is absolute insanity to bet my life, my precious time, my money, my heart, and my mind on an organization that has so many serious problematic challenges to its foundational truth claims.

How were you betting your life? You are now betting that the universe is a product of random chance, and that you need not make any effort to connect to a God who created everything, including you. Isn't that a much riskier bet? You are also betting that God will not hold you accountable for the faith of others that you are working diligently to destroy. That's about as risky a bet as I can imagine.

There are just way too many problems. We're not just talking about one issue here. We're talking about dozens of serious issues that undermine the very foundation of the LDS Church and its truth claims.

Except that we're really not. We're talking about one fundamental assumption - that the Church was supposed to be perfect - that was incorrect. Your basic assumption has colored your perception of everything to the point where the Church can do no right.

The past year was the worst year of my life.

This version of your letter was written in 2017. Are you saying 2016 was the worst year of your life? Or are you trying to perpetuate the illusion that this weaponized assault on the faith of millions is really just an organic representation of your 2013 faith crisis?

I experienced a betrayal, loss, and sadness unlike anything I've ever known.

That was then; this is now. Now you are experiencing financial wealth built on the broken faith of others.

"Do what is right; let the consequence follow" now holds a completely different meaning for me.

Apparently it does. The consequences that have followed have been disastrous for many, and not because you are doing what is right.

I desperately searched for answers to all of the problems. To me, the answer eventually came but it was not what I expected...or hoped for.

And what do you hope for now? Do you hope that there really is a God? Or do you hope that more and more people will use the CES Letter as a catalyst to abandon their faith and pay you for the privilege?

You are not anxiously engaged in a good cause here, Jeremy. You now make a living by destroying faith, destroying families, and destroying lives.

As a child, it seemed so simple; Every step was clearly marked.
So you clung to childish errors that you never thought to doubt
Priesthood, mission, sweetheart, temple; Bright with hope I soon embarked.
But the first clear sign of trouble's when you quickly bailed out.

But now I have become a man,
As error runs you wild
And doubt the promise of the plan.
Still thinking like a child.

For the path is growing steeper,
So you push others down to hell
And a slip could mean my death.
“If others die, it’s just as well.”

Plunging upward, ever deeper,
Celebrating faith that dies
I can barely catch my breath.
As you make money from your lies

Oh, where within this untamed wild
A mercenary plan
Is the star that led me as a child?
You sold it as a man.

As I crest the shadowed mountain,
And break the promise of your youth
I embrace the endless sky;
While you’re abandoning the truth.
The expanse of heaven’s fountain
In which you really don’t believe
Now unfolds before my eye
As you continue to deceive.
A thousand stars shine on the land
Not one of them is true
The chart drafted by my own hand.
Yes. Your only God is you.

– THE JOURNEY (TO HELL) –

An unwilling poetic collaboration between Jeremy Runnells and Jim Bennett

That seems like a rather harsh way to leave things, so perhaps I should take this opportunity to thank you for a great gift you have given me.

In my last conversation with Dad prior to his stroke, he told me he had read my reply to you from beginning to end. It may, in fact, be the last thing of any length that he read in his lifetime. So, Jeremy, this was probably not your intent, but your letter gave me a precious and sacred bond with my father in the final days of his life that I will always cherish. I cannot thank you enough for that. I mean that without a hint of sarcasm or irony.

I often wonder if I would be an active Latter-day Saint if it weren’t for the patience and

wisdom of my father. When I found troubling questions, I would always bring them to him, and he usually had a solid answer. If he didn't, he would find one together with me. I learned from him that the Church's claims could withstand scrutiny, and he never made me feel as if my doubts were signs of unworthiness or evil.

To me, the most troubling part of the CES Letter is not any of its challenges to Latter-day Saint truth claims. Rather, it's in the basic and fundamental way you, Jeremy, have misunderstood or completely missed what the Holy Spirit is.

I can recall quite vividly one of the first experiences I had that was an undeniable witness of the Spirit. I was in a pageant at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles called III Nephi, which dramatized Christ's visit to the New World after His resurrection. I was nine or ten years old, I think. I played one of the children who greets the Savior, and we were taught two songs to sing on that occasion – one was “I Feel My Savior's Love,” and the other was “The Love of God.” I can recall feeling a very powerful witness that Jesus was real; that He loved me, and that He knew me by name. I can remember a testimony meeting right after the dress rehearsal, where one of the men stood up and said “That which you feel right now is the love of God.” He was right. I knew he was telling the truth, just as surely and plainly as I knew I existed.

The song “I Feel My Savior's Love” was written for that pageant, and it has since become something of a staple among Mormon children. I've heard it a billion times. But I hadn't heard the song “The Love of God” since the day I last sang it on the stage of the Shrine. That is, until one Easter stake conference, when the stake choir sang it as a counterpoint to “I Know that My Redeemer Lives.” And instantly, I felt that same sweet assurance, the power of the Spirit reminding me of the certainty I learned so long ago.

That which I felt was the love of God.

Maybe that means I'm damned for all eternity, but that's a bet I'm willing to take. There are some things that sink too deeply into your soul to deny them. You never seem to have had that experience, and that makes me deeply sad.

I would also concede that the best point you make in your letter has to do with the idea of prophetic infallibility. We do a massive disservice to people by implying that the Church is perfect, that prophets never err, and that it's faithless to recognize that nobody gets their agency extracted, not even prophets.

Discipleship required us to be patient enough with an imperfect church that we were willing to endure error in order to sustain leaders who, unlike a perfect Christ, have weaknesses and blind spots and therefore actually need to be sustained.

And isn't that a better story anyway? Isn't it better to imagine a church that develops and grows and learns from its mistakes?

That's the story, incidentally, that the Lord has always expected us to tell. I don't think that people who stand up in a testimony meeting to praise this as “the only true church” realize that they're misquoting the Lord, who never actually said that. What he did say was this was

the only true and living church. (See D&C 1:30)

Plenty of other churches have truth in them. Some have gobs of it. But this church is both true *and* living. It is more than just correct principles; it is the living people doing everything in their power to apply them. And the Church, like all living things, develops, grows, and learns from its mistakes.

I don't say that to be critical. I love the Church. I love its doctrines, which provide a cohesive and glorious vision of the universe that has no equal in the other religions and philosophies of the world. But I also love the Church in practice, which has repeatedly come to my rescue, temporally and spiritually.

I will always be grateful for a ward that rallied around my family when my oldest daughter injured her spinal cord in a skiing accident and was left partially paralyzed. They organized a massive, successful fundraiser that covered most of our more-than-significant medical expenses, and they assembled a team of thirty-or-so people who came into our house and scrubbed it from top to bottom. They also fixed broken cabinets, replaced damaged electrical wiring, and installed a new kitchen sink, three new toilets, an entire handicapped-accessible bathroom, and double railings on two stairwells and in our front and back entrances.

Their main focus, however, was completely redecorating my daughter's bedroom, which now includes an entirely new bedframe and bedding, new furniture, a fresh coat of paint, and a beautiful mural of a flowering tree just above her bed. And just to make sure that my other daughter didn't feel left out, they entirely redid her room just for good measure, installing a built-in new window seat at the base of her bed.

None of that has any bearing on whether the Book of Abraham is an accurate translation or not, but I think it's important not to lose sight of what the Church really is on a practical, day-to-day level. On the whole, it makes bad people good and good people better.

More importantly, this church is also transformative because people have had a genuine, powerful experience with Jesus Christ, often through the Book of Mormon. I have seen, firsthand, what the power of Christ can do, and I have encountered God in this Church in an intimate, personal, and undeniable way. I don't think those kinds of spiritual experiences require me to abandon reason or stop asking questions, but they keep me from panicking the next time I hear an accusation against Joseph Smith or the Church that I've never heard before.

I have found God in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I wrote this with the hope that, despite your best efforts, other find Him there, too.
