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## First Vision Concerns & Questions

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## FIRST VISION

### *Concerns & Questions*

*“Our whole strength rests on the validity of that [first] vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”*

– PRESIDENT GORDON B. HINCKLEY, *THE MARVELOUS FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH*

*“I am not worried that the Prophet Joseph Smith gave a number of versions of the first vision anymore than I am worried that there are four different writers of the gospels in the New Testament, each with his own perceptions, each telling the events to meet his own purpose for writing at the time. I am more concerned with the fact that God has revealed in this dispensation a great and marvelous and beautiful plan that motivates men and women to love their Creator and their Redeemer; to appreciate and serve one another; to walk in faith on the road that leads to immortality and eternal life.”*

– PRESIDENT GORDON B. HINCKLEY, *“God Hath Not Given Us the Spirit of Fear,”* 11/5/93

1. There are at least 4 different first vision accounts by Joseph Smith, which the Church admits in its November 2013 *First Vision Accounts* essay:

## SHORT ANSWER:

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**There are precisely four, not “at least” four. The accounts are remarkably consistent, and it is unreasonable to expect, as you do, that they ought to be nearly identical. Critics strain credulity in attempts to manufacture contradictions where they do not exist.**

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## LONG ANSWER:

Saying “the Church admits” suggests 2013 was the first time this fact was acknowledged. As demonstrated by the comment from President Hinckley above, that’s not true. I read all four versions in official church sources when I was a missionary from 1987-1989. This four versions were widely acknowledged well before the Church’s essay on the subject.

- 1832 HAND WRITTEN ACCOUNT •
- TWO 1835 ACCOUNTS

No, there is only one 1835 account and a slight, seventeen-word reference to that account in a journal entry a few days later.

- 1838 ACCOUNT (OFFICIAL VERSION) •
- 1842 ACCOUNT •

I can recall being troubled by many allegations against the Church when I first heard them, but for the life of me, I cannot muster any degree of concern about the different accounts of the First Vision. Upon discovery, this information was a complete non-issue for me.

On my mission, we repeatedly showed the movie “The First Vision,” complete with Joseph throwing a handful of seeds in the air, and the narration of the movie drew from both the 1838 account and the 1842 Wentworth Letter, and I wanted to know where the non-1838 language had come from. This was in a pre-Internet world, and I would only have had access to official church stuff. I found an article, probably in the *Ensign*, that compared the accounts, and my reaction was along the lines of, “Oh, okay. So that’s where that stuff came from.” It didn’t occur to me that I should be the least bit disturbed by this.



**Joseph Smith in the 1976 First Vision video as he's about to throw away some perfectly good seeds.**



But all right, in 1832, Joseph says he “saw the Lord,” and that’s it. Does this contradict the later accounts? As much as you’re eager to imply that it does, the fact is undeniable: it does not.

A contradiction would require two irreconcilable facts in two different accounts. This account, for instance, says Joseph was 15, and the 1838 account says he was 14. That’s a contradiction. (Joseph’s incorrect age was later written in by Frederick G. Williams as a marginal note above Joseph’s handwriting in the 1832 account. There’s no reason to assume it’s anything other than an honest mistake. If you’re expecting infallibility in the 1832 account, you’re in serious trouble. The grammar alone in that thing is truly awful.)

A person who visits his parents and later tells a friend, “I saw Mom yesterday” would not be contradicting themselves if they later told someone else, “I saw Dad yesterday.” Both things are true. Mom’s presence does not preclude Dad’s, and the Son’s presence does not preclude the presence of the Father.

- 12 years after the vision happened.

Yeah, why didn’t Joseph write something down about it at a time closer to his experience? Where’s the 1821 or 1822 account?

When the question is asked that way, it become clear how shaky your objection is. The First Vision doesn’t appear in any 1821 or 1822 writings of Joseph Smith because *there are no 1821 or 1822 writings of Joseph Smith*. Joseph was 15 and 16 in 1821 and 1822, respectively, and he was, by his own description, “an obscure boy... of no consequence in the world” who was “doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor.” He was uneducated and essentially illiterate. He didn’t write anything down because he wasn’t capable of writing.



**The Collected Writings of Joseph Smith  
1820-1827**

From 1820 until 1827, when Joseph started making rumblings about golden plates, nobody anticipated that this worthless kid was going to found a major religious movement, so records about him vary between scarce and nonexistent. And prior to 1830, the only written items we have from Joseph are the revelations he received in connection to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. In 1830, he receives a revelation, now D&C Section 20, that there is to be a “record kept,” so that’s probably the first time he gets a sense that maybe he ought to be writing more stuff down.

So with an 1830 commandment to start keeping a record, Joseph begins the process of recording revelations, but he still doesn’t begin keeping a personal journal until 1832. And what’s one of the first things he writes about when he begins his personal history? The First Vision. That seems like an entirely reasonable timeline for discussion of the event.

- Age is 15-years-old (“16th year of my age”), not 14-years-old.

An error by Frederick G. Williams, yes, as noted above. There’s no reason to think the error was anything but an honest mistake.

- No reference to asking the question about which church he should join.

Actually, there’s no reference to any specific question at all. All he says is that he was “calling upon the Lord,” which I think we can safely assume involved sentences with question marks at the end of them. As he begins the account by expressing his eagerness to find a “society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament,” it seems likely that “Which church should I join?” was a question that readily came up.

- No description of being attacked by Satan.

Satan isn’t mentioned in any of the accounts. In 1835 and 1838, there are references to darkness and to his feeling of doom, but the devil’s presence is drawn by inference, not by any explicit identification. What’s curious is that the 1842 account omits any reference to the satanic part of the vision, either. You’d have thought that if this were all fiction, he’d have gotten his story straight by then, yes?

See, to me, the fact that Joseph doesn’t feel it necessary to recount every detail of the vision every time he tells it is evidence of authenticity, not fraud. A con man gets his story straight at the outset and never varies from it. They also get nervous when the questions go to details they hadn’t thought of yet. Joseph obviously felt no need to remember anything by rote - he could recount all or part of the story without fear that he’d got caught in a contradiction. I think that if this version read precisely like the more familiar 1838 version, it would be more suspicious, not less. That’s not how human beings recount events.

As I’m writing this, I’m fresh off a vacation to England and France. I’ve talked about my travels with a whole host of people, and I’ve emphasized different elements of the trip at different times, leaving out some details in one version and adding them to others. That’s how people talk to each other and share memories. Why shouldn’t Joseph be allowed to do that with the First Vision?



What you're citing aren't contradictions; they're excerpts from the whole. If I tell you about my trip to Normandy but not my trip to Paris, does that mean I'm contradicting myself when I tell you, later, that I went to Paris, too?



**This Paris vacation selfie contradicts my Normandy vacation selfies.**

Likewise, Joseph is telling part of the story in each account, although the 1838 account - the "official version" - is the one that clearly seems to be designed to be the most comprehensive. That's why the details that appear in the other three are all found in the 1838 version.

2. Contradictions: In the 1832 account 7, Joseph wrote that before praying he knew there was no true or living faith or denomination upon the earth as built by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. His primary purpose in going to prayer was to seek forgiveness for his sins.

*"...by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that was built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ..."*

In the official 1838 account, however, Joseph wrote:

*"My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join"...(for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)."*

*This is in direct contradiction to his 1832 first vision account.*

If it is, it's also in direct contradiction to what he wrote in the canonized 1838 account - *just eight versus earlier*:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; **or, are they all wrong together?** If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?  
[Emphasis added]

How could he ask if they were all wrong in verse 10 and then say in verse 18 that it had “never entered into his heart” that they were all wrong? Remember, this was the definitive version that Joseph was writing for the History of the Church, and it undoubtedly had more than a few proofreading eyes on it before it was published to the world at large. So either Joseph and his scribes were just too lazy to notice he directly contradicts himself in the course of a few paragraphs, or there's something else going on here.

The key phrase is “entered into my heart.”

We can have confidence in what Joseph means by this because it is not the only time he uses variations of this phrase. Here's what he [says](#) about his experience reading James 1:5.

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power **to the heart of man** than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to **enter** with great force **into every feeling of my heart**. [JSH 1:12, emphasis added]

This is a phrase Joseph uses to describe something more powerful than mere intellectual assent. He's describing a spiritual experience, where the feelings of the heart complement and contribute to clarity of mind. It's a concept that shows up in the [Doctrine and Covenants](#), too:

Yea, behold, I will tell you **in your mind and in your heart**, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Now, behold, **this is the spirit of revelation**; behold, this is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. [D&C 8:2-3, emphasis added]

Joseph had clearly considered the possibility all churches were in error in verse 10 (and in the 1832 account,) but the idea hadn't really sunk in – i.e. entered into his heart – until after verse 18.

I think all of us have had this experience – things happen that we choose not to believe. Even when we have solid information, we don't allow our intellectual knowledge to become wisdom and “enter into our hearts.” He's describing the very human process of denial, much like Amulek from the Book of Mormon, who once said of his own testimony, “I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know.” (Alma 10:6)

Make up your mind, Amulek! Did you know or didn't you know?! That's a direct contradiction!



In the case of “Forgiveness of Sins v. Which Church is True,” you’re hung up on a false dichotomy. Joseph was preoccupied with what he needed to do to prepare to meet God. You see that in all of Joseph’s firsthand accounts.

“[M]y mind become seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns of for the welfare of my immortal Soul,” he wrote in 1832. “I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequ[e]nces;” he wrote in 1835. “My mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness... my feelings were deep and often poignant... What is to be done?” he wrote in 1838. “I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future [i.e. eternal] state,” he wrote in 1842.

These are different words, to be sure, but there’s no mistaking the commonality of their underlying meaning. I believe that all these accounts show that Joseph’s deepest desire was to know what he had to do to be saved. That was the one and only item on his agenda in the Sacred Grove.

The question he asked, then, about which church he should join tells us about young Joseph’s theological assumptions. It’s clear in all accounts that salvation and church membership were inextricably linked in his mind. Even in 1832, where he doesn’t specify what question he asked the Lord before his sins were forgiven, he goes on at great length about his concern for the error he sees in all the churches. The possibility that a church might not be necessary doesn’t seem to occur to Joseph, nor would it have been likely to occur to anyone in the early 19th Century. Christ without a church in 1820? Who could imagine such heresy? Certainly not an illiterate farmboy who, at that point, had no inkling what the Lord had in store for him.

In Joseph’s mind, “which church is the right one” and “how can I get my sins forgiven” were variations on the same theme, and only minor variations at that. Rather than show inconsistency, the two accounts are remarkably united in their depiction of Joseph’s concern for his soul and his assumptions about what was necessary to save it.

So with that understanding, the apparent contradiction about whether or not he had decided that all the churches were wrong prior to praying becomes far less problematic. The 1832 account spends more time detailing the specific problems with all the churches than the 1838 account, indicating that Joseph still believed in the importance of joining a church to gain access to the Atonement. True, he doesn’t explicitly say that any church membership is necessary, but he didn’t have to – those reading his account in the 19th Century would have had the same assumptions, and neither Joseph nor his audience would have even considered the modern/post-modern idea of an effectual Christian life outside the boundaries of organized religion. Even if all the churches were wrong to one degree or another, surely Joseph would still have felt it necessary to join the best one – or the “most correct” one, to borrow a phrase from earlier in your letter and later in his life.

3. Late appearance of claims: No one - including Joseph Smith’s family members and the Saints – had ever heard about the first vision from twelve to twenty-two years after it supposedly occurred.

You're offering a fallacious argument from silence here. Since you can't find written statements about the First Vision, you assume this proves that nobody talked about it. But other than a handful revelations with regard to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Joseph didn't really write anything down until 1832, twelve years after the First Vision occurred. Since nothing he said during that time was recorded for posterity, are we to assume that was because he never spoke about anything prior to 1832, let alone the First Vision?

Still, Joseph provided some clear clues as to why the First Vision may not have been one of his favorite subjects to discuss openly. Beginning with JS-H: Verse 20

When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. And as I leaned up to the fireplace, mother inquired what the matter was.

Here it is – the first opportunity for Joseph to unburden himself of this great secret, and to the person to whom he was closer than anyone else in the world, the one person more likely than any other to believe his astonishing tale – and what does Joseph do?

I replied, “Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.” I then said to my mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.”

Reticence to share was his initial reaction, which is not at all surprising when we remember that we're talking about 14-year-old kid here, one who has just experienced something overwhelmingly difficult to process. And events shortly thereafter would make him even more gun-shy about spreading the word.

He finally gets up the courage to tell a Methodist minister about the vision, and the minister blows him off “with great contempt” and makes him feel foolish for sharing it. He soon discovers that talking about the vision brings him nothing but trouble.

Verses 21 and 22:

I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.

It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and it was often the cause of great sorrow to myself.

So when bullies are mocking you for talking about seeing God, what do you do? You stop talking about it. Certainly your family stops talking about it. But that doesn't stop others for making fun of you for it, which, according to Joseph, they did – and some of it even leaked over into records of the time.

*The Reflector*, a Palmyra newspaper, ridiculed the Mormons in February of 1831 for claiming that “Smith (they affirmed), had seen God frequently and personally.” A number of critics use similar language, suggesting this was a part of the local gossip scene for quite some time.

There's also D&C 20: 5, which chastises Joseph as follows:

After it was truly manifested unto this first elder[ i.e Joseph Smith] that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world;

And when was it “truly manifested unto” Joseph that he had received a remission of his sins? In the 1832 account, Joseph says this happened when the Lord appeared to him.

Quoting Joseph from his 1832 account:

“I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.”

That would make verse 5 an 1830 direct reference to the First Vision, which negates your contention that there are no references to the First Vision until 1832. The 1838 account actually corroborates the idea in verse 5 that after the vision, Joseph was “entangled again in the vanities of the world.” Rather than contradicting each other, the references and accounts of the First Vision are actually quite consistent, even as they interweave with other revelations and events.

The first and earliest written account of the first vision in Joseph Smith's journal was 12 years after the spring of 1820.

As both his critics and his family repeatedly confirmed, Joseph was functionally illiterate in the spring of 1820. He wrote down nothing. And as I noted above, 1832 is pretty much when the earliest account of anything in Joseph Smith's life was written on paper. For example, it's the earliest written account where Joseph Smith records his own birthday. Should we assume that until 1832, nobody in his family knew when his birthday was? Or, better yet, that he made up his birthday, too?

There is absolutely no record of any claimed “first vision” prior to this 1832 account.

There is absolutely no record of any claimed quote/unquote first vision in the 1832 account, either. Or the 1835 account, the 1838 account, or in 1842. The phrase “first vision” appears to be a modern invention to describe Joseph's experience.

Despite the emphasis placed on it now, the first vision does not appear to have been widely taught to members of the Church until the 1840s, more than a decade after the Church was founded, and 20 years after it allegedly occurred.

It appears Joseph Smith's biography wasn't often addressed in church sermons or missionary work, whether it be the First Vision, the translation process of the Book of Mormon, or anything else. Richard Bushman, in *Rough Stone Rolling* p. 80, said that "Joseph Smith was never a topic" of early missionary discussions. This is not to say that nobody discussed him, but that they seemed to think the message was far more important than the messenger.

The idea that Joseph Smith's biography ought to be a core element of the Restored Gospel appears to be a relatively recent development in Church history. You clearly expect the Church to have functioned in the early days the same way it functions now, but that's just presentism more than anything else.



**Why is there no mention of early missionary black name tags?**

In any case, if the First Vision was a late 1842 invention two years before Joseph's death, it seems likely that someone would have made a note of surprise regarding such a radical retcon of his personal history. If somebody did, we have no record of it.

James B. Allen, former BYU Professor and Assistant Church Historian explains :

*"There is little if any evidence, however, that by the early 1830's Joseph Smith was telling the story in public. At least if he were telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to have recorded it at the time, and no one was criticizing him for it. Not even in his own history did Joseph Smith mention being criticized in this period for telling the story of the first vision... The fact that none of the available*

*contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830's, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story of the first vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days."*

In that same article, Allen also provides examples of those who recall hearing the story from Joseph himself during the 1830s. "In 1835 he was willing to tell the story to a visitor. There is further evidence, based on reminiscences, to suggest that the story was known on a limited basis in the 1830's." It would be likely that if he's willing to tell non-Mormon visitors the whole story, it's pretty hard to claim that "[n]o one - including Joseph Smith's family members and the Saints - had ever heard about the first vision from twelve to twenty-two years after it supposedly occurred." Your own source makes your initial statement absurd on its face.

This article, wherein the official Assistant Church Historian reviews the four versions of Joseph's First Vision accounts in great detail, was also published in 1965, nearly sixty years prior to when you claim the Church finally "admitted" to multiple First Vision accounts.

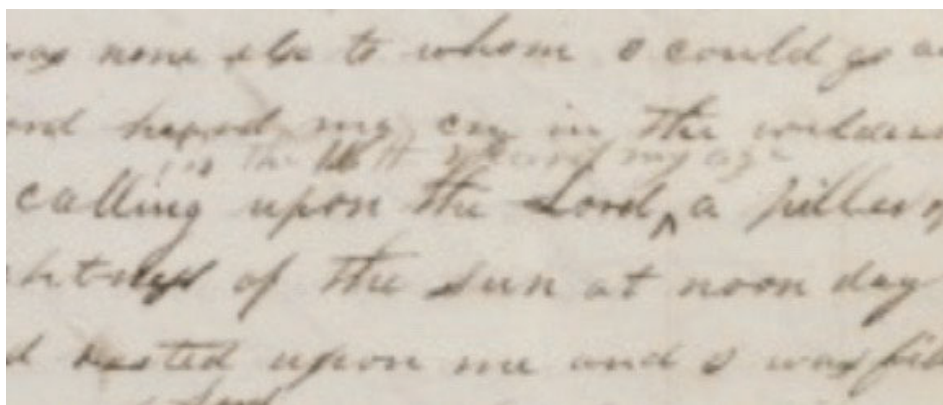
#### 4. Other problems:

- Who appears to him? Depending on the account, a spirit, an angel, two angels, Jesus, many angels or the Father and the Son appear to him - are all over the place.

Nonsense. None of the accounts say that "a spirit" or "an angel" were the only ones present. One account explicitly mentions only one personage, and another mentions as an afterthought that angels were there, too. That's the sum total of any differences. Hardly all over the place.

- The dates/his ages: The 1832 account states Joseph was 15-years-old while the other accounts state he was 14-years-old when he had the vision.

Frederick G. Williams goofed. We've already addressed this. Twice. Perhaps you need photographic evidence to prevent you from bringing it up a third time.



**Frederick Williams's errant handwriting in the margins of the 1832 account**

- The reason or motive for seeking divine help – Bible reading and conviction of sins, a revival, a desire to know if God exists, wanting to know which church to join – are not reported the same in each account.



This is a truly bizarre complaint with some very strange assumptions. In which account, for instance, does Joseph claim that he went into the woods to pray solely because of a revival, especially since none of his accounts mention revivals? He also mentions his birthplace in both the 1832 and 1838 versions. Because he left out his birthplace in the 1835 and 1842 versions, should we then presume that he couldn't really have been born in Vermont because this was not "reported the same in each account?"

You act as if these elements, all of which come into play at different times in the overall story, are all completely unrelated non sequiturs – in a previous version of your letter, you said they were "all over the map." No, "all over the map" would be one version where Joseph prayed because he was dared to by Hyrum, and another where he prayed because he thought that it would help him find buried treasure, and yet another where he thought prayer was the only way to ward off elephants. (Another mention of elephants! Could it be mere coincidence?)

Your elements aren't all over the map; they're all part of the same map, or at least different maps covering the same territory. Religious excitement leads to Bible reading, which leads to a desire to know more about God, which leads to a conviction of sins, which leads to a desire to know which church to join to be forgiven. All steps on the same journey; all plot points on the same map. Some accounts/maps don't have all the same plots pointed in the other accounts/maps, but all the points are consistent across the accounts.

The fact that different maps drawn at different times don't look like photocopies of each other shouldn't be surprising at all. Your map of the "lands of Joseph Smith's youth" don't have all the same points on them that other maps of the same territory do. Does that make either of those maps contradictory or fraudulent? Does it mean that Keokuk, Iowa doesn't really exist?

- Contrary to Joseph's account, the historical record shows that there was no revival in Palmyra, New York in 1820. FairMormon concedes :

"While these revivals did not occur in Palmyra itself, their mention in the local newspaper would have given Joseph Smith the sense that there was substantial revival activity in the region."

There was one in 1817 and there was another in 1824.

But you know what there isn't? A single mention of a revival in any of Joseph's First Vision accounts.

There are records from his brother, William Smith, and his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, both stating that the family joined Presbyterianism after Alvin's death in November 1823 despite Joseph Smith claiming in the official 1838 account that they joined in 1820 (3 years before Alvin Smith's death).

You provide no records from Lucy Mack Smith. Your single source here is article about an 1893 interview with Joseph's brother William. I don't understand why second-hand recollections by a very old man offered 73 years after the First Vision should be given more credence than Joseph's firsthand and far more contemporaneous accounts.

I also don't understand the overall significance of this objection or why it matters when the Smiths became Presbyterians.

Why did Joseph hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead, as shown previously with the Book of Mormon, if he clearly saw that the Father and Son were separate embodied beings in the official First Vision?



**In faith!**



**That's the answer!**



**To ask of God with real faith!**



**And I will!**



**I WILL!!!**

He didn't. As shown previously in my reply, the Book of Mormon does not demonstrate that Joseph Smith held a Trinitarian view of the Godhead. If what I learned in the mission field is accurate, he couldn't even hold on to handful of seeds.

(Sorry. I've seen that video far too many times.)

As with the rock in the hat story, I did not know there are multiple first vision accounts.

And as with the rock in the hat story, that's because you didn't bother to study, not because the Church was actively withholding this information from you. It was readily available for anyone interested in the subject. If I could find it on my mission from an Ensign in the late 1980s, it wasn't hard to find.

I did not know of their contradictions...

And you still don't, because the only contradiction is Frederick G. Williams's marginal error, which you mention three times.

... or that the Church members did not know about a first vision until 12-22 years after it supposedly happened.

An argument from silence on your part, and probably not true.

I was unaware of these omissions in the mission field, as I was never taught or trained in the Missionary Training Center to teach investigators these facts.

Facts aren't the issue; your assumptions are. The facts as you taught them in the mission field are consistently represented in all four of these accounts. Yet you assume that all four accounts need to be identical, or near identical, to be accurate. If you had to apply that standard to the various versions of your CES Letter, you'd be in serious trouble.