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Other Concerns & Questions

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OTHER

Concerns & Questions

“The dominant narrative is not true. It can’t be sustained.”

– RICHARD BUSHMAN, LDS HISTORIAN, SCHOLAR, PATRIARCH
[VIDEO](#) | [BUSHMAN’S AFTERMATH LETTER](#)

July 19, 2016

In the middle of the week last week I began to receive thank you notes from people who had read a statement of mine about the Church’s historical narrative requiring reconstruction. I had no idea what was going on until Dan Peterson wrote about a “kerfuffle”—the word of choice for the occasion—on the blogs...

Sampling a few of the comments on Dan Peterson’s blog I discovered that some people thought I had thrown in the towel and finally admitted the Church’s story of its divine origins did not hold up. Others read my words differently; I was only saying that there were many errors in the standard narrative that required correction...

As it is, I still come down on the side of the believers in inspiration and divine happenings—in angels, plates, translations, revelations—while others viewing the same facts are convinced they disqualify Joseph Smith entirely. A lot of pain, anger, and alienation come out of these disputes. I wish we could find ways to be more generous and understanding with one another.”

– RICHARD BUSHMAN, LDS HISTORIAN, SCHOLAR, PATRIARCH, IN HIS SUPPOSED “AFTERMATH LETTER,” WHERE HE AGAIN MAKES IT CLEAR HE DOES NOT AGREE WITH JEREMY RUNNELLS OR THE CES LETTER.

SHORT ANSWER:

The CES Letter led with your strongest arguments, and all of them fall woefully short. Given that reality, it's not surprising that you get nowhere with this assorted handful of leftovers.

LONG ANSWER:

These concerns are secondary to all of the above.

Yes. We all realize that nothing is more important than the rock in the hat.

These concerns do not matter if the foundational truth claims (Book of Mormon, First Vision, Prophets, Book of Abraham, Witnesses, Priesthood, Temples, etc.) are not true.

And you have not made anything close to a convincing case that any of those claims are false.

1. Church's Dishonesty and Whitewashing Over Its History

Adding to the above deceptions and dishonesty over history (rock in hat translation...

Rock, hat. Hat, rock. Kind of like "Oprah, Uma, Uma, Oprah," only different.

... polygamy/polyandry, multiple First Vision accounts, etc.), ...

Which, of course, we've repeatedly discussed already,

...the following bother me:

2013 OFFICIAL DECLARATION 2 HEADER UPDATE DISHONESTY

Offending text:

"Early in its history, Church leaders stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. **Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.**" [Emphasis added]

This is a minor variation on a previous theme – not a complaint about the priesthood ban, but on how we talk about it. The Church says that we don't have clear insights about how the ban started. That's an accurate statement.

In sharp contrast to the above statement:

No, what follows is not in sharp contrast to the above statement. It offers reasons for why the ban was put in place and why it continued, but not any information about how it began.

1949 FIRST PRESIDENCY STATEMENT:

This is not, in fact, an official First Presidency Statement. The following is a letter written by the First Presidency to a private individual. Calling it a “First Presidency Statement” implies that it was issued to the general membership of the church, which it was not.

August 17, 1949

Hey! That’s my birthday! (Well, not the 1949 part.)

*The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of **direct commandment from the Lord,***

I, too, have problems with the bolded part of this statement, as it contradicts President McKay’s labeling of the ban as a “policy, not a doctrine,” but I presume you’ve emphasized it because you think it contradicts the statement that we don’t have clear insights into the origin of the ban.

It doesn’t.

We have no record of a revelation – i.e. a direct commandment from the Lord – putting the ban in place, and we don’t know when the ban actually began, given the fact that Joseph Smith ordained black people to the priesthood.

This was written in 1949, around a century after the ordination of black people stopped, but we can’t put a precise date on when that happened, since **Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.** (See what I did there?)

*on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time. **The prophets of the Lord have made several statements as to the operation of the principle. President Brigham Young said: ‘Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the holy priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the holy priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we now are entitled to.***

I find the bolded portion to be a deplorably racist explanation for the ban that the Church has since disavowed, but how does it offer any clear insight as to how and when the ban began?

President Wilford Woodruff made the following statement: ‘The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have.’

See? There was some light amid the darkness. No clear insight into the origins of the ban here, though.

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the privilege is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the Negroes.

The First Presidency

This is a faulty and racist explanation of the ban, surely, but it in no way offers insight into how and when the ban originated, probably because **Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.**

Along with the above First Presidency statement, there are many other statements and explanations made by prophets and apostles clearly “justifying” the Church’s racism.

You’re trying to pull a bait-and-switch, because racism isn’t the issue you raised with this objection. You’re saying that the Church is lying when it says we don’t know when and how the ban first began. They aren’t. Certainly none of these quotes provide any clear insights into the origin of this practice.

So, the 2013 edition Official Declaration 2 Header in the scriptures is not only misleading, it’s dishonest.

Not at all. If you have clear insights into the origin of this practice, why don’t you provide them? Why can you not tell me when and where this practice began?

We do have records – including from the First Presidency itself – with very clear insights on the origins of the ban on the blacks.

We do not. We have many clear insights into why the ban was perpetuated, but none into how it began. When was the ban implemented? We don’t know; Church records provide no clear insights. Was the ban a deliberate decision, or was it just something that started happening in practice and was later institutionalized as church policy? I believe the latter to be the case, but we don’t know for sure – Church records provide no clear insights.

And the Church has never had a “ban on the blacks.” Black members have always been welcome, and, unlike many churches of the time, they were never segregated from the rest of the congregation.

UPDATE: The Church released a [Race and the Priesthood](#) essay which contradicts their [2013 Official Declaration 2 Header](#).

Nope. Not even a little bit.

In the essay, they point to Brigham Young as the originator of the ban.

No, they don't. They point to Brigham Young as the first to announce the ban in 1852, but there is plenty of evidence that, in practice, black people had not been ordained to the priesthood for many years prior to that announcement. Did the ordination of black people stop at some point in Joseph Smith's lifetime? Maybe. Many leaders after Brigham certainly thought it did. Fact is, we don't know. **Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.**

Further, they effectively throw 10 latter-day "Prophets, Seers, and Revelators" under the bus as they "disavow" the "theories" that these ten men taught and justified – for 130 years – as doctrine and revelation for the Church's institutional and theological racism.

When additional light and knowledge comes into the world, we rejoice for what we now have rather than condemn those who didn't have it. People are judged only according to the light and knowledge they have received. That way, nobody gets thrown under the bus.

Finally, they denounce the idea that God punishes individuals with black skin or that God withholds blessings based on the color of one's skin while completely ignoring the [contradiction](#) of the keystone Book of Mormon teaching exactly this.

You couldn't be more wrong on this one. The Book of Mormon's references to skin color have precisely zero to do with the priesthood ban, which was solely applied to men of African descent, not Native Americans, who, because of the Book of Mormon, are promised tremendous blessings that are arguably even greater than those promised to us boring white people.

In addition, the Lamanites were never denied the priesthood and had no blessings withheld because of their skin color, and were often more righteous than the lighter-skinner Nephites. Here's some good anti-racist counsel from a Nephite prophet:

"Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them [i.e. the Lamanites] because of the darkness of their skins;" (Jacob 3:9.)

ZINA DIANTHA HUNTINGTON YOUNG

(The following is a quick biographic snapshot of Zina:)

- She was married for 7.5 months and was about 6 months pregnant with her first husband, Henry Jacobs, when she married Joseph after being told Joseph's life was in danger from an angel with a drawn sword.

Wrong. She was sealed to Joseph for eternity only, never married to him. (No sex.) The angel with the drawn sword did not threaten to kill Joseph if he didn't marry Zina.

Didn't you already raise this in your polygamy section?

- After Joseph's death, Zina married Brigham Young and had a child with him while still legally married to Henry Jacobs.

I can see why you've singled out Zina, as there is, indeed, murkiness as to her married legal status through all of this. What there is not is any confusion as to who Zina considered her husband at any given time. She left Henry, describing her marriage as "unhappy," and lived with Brigham after they were sealed. At no time was she living concurrently with both men. So while this is a tricky one in terms of legality, it is not tricky in terms of sexual polyandry, of which there was none.

Brigham sent Henry on missions while being married to Zina.

Your implication is that Henry was not aware of Zina's sealing to Brigham, which is not the case.

- Zina would eventually become the third General Relief Society President of the Church.

Good for her! Sounds like she was a remarkable woman.

ZINA'S WHITEWASHED BIOGRAPHICAL PAGE ON [LDS.ORG](https://www.lds.org)

- In the "Marriage and Family" section, it does not list Joseph Smith as a husband or concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs.

That's probably because Joseph wasn't her husband or concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs. Joseph and Zina never lived together as husband and wife.

- In the "Marriage and Family" section, it does not list Brigham Young as a concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs.

Probably because she never lived with both men concurrently.

- There is nothing in there about the polyandry.

That's because there wasn't any polyandry, as Zina never lived with more than one husband at a time.

- It is deceptive in stating that Henry and Zina "did not remain together" while omitting that Henry separated only after Brigham Young took his wife and told Henry that Zina was now only his (Brigham) wife.

How is it deceptive? They did not, in fact, remain together. The idea that Henry was the only one who "separated" and that Brigham Young "took" Henry's wife is rather sexist, as it

presupposes that Zina herself had no say in the matter. The LDS.org biography plainly states that Zina was Brigham Young's plural wife.

ZINA'S INDEX FILE ON LDS-OWNED [FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](https://www.familysearch.org)

- It clearly shows all of Zina's husbands, including her marriage to Joseph Smith.

Wasn't your problem that the LDS Church was whitewashing its history by purging references to Zina's sealing to Joseph? If that's the case, how did this reference escape the purge?

In any case, the purpose of Family Search.org is to gather information for temple work, so it makes sense that an eternity-only sealing would be referenced.

Why is Joseph Smith not listed as one of Zina's husbands in the "Marriage and Family" section or anywhere else on her biographical page on [lds.org](https://www.lds.org)?

Because the "Marriage and Family" section doesn't have lists at all. She never lived with Joseph as his wife – she was sealed to him for eternity only. He was not one of her husbands in mortality.

Why is there not a single mention or hint of polyandry on her page or in that marriage section when she was married to two latter-day prophets and having children with Brigham Young while still being married to her first husband, Henry?

Because she was not married to two latter-day prophets. She was married to one - and he definitely gets mentioned - and only sealed to the other. Also because she was not still married to Henry when she had a single child – not multiple children – with Brigham Young.

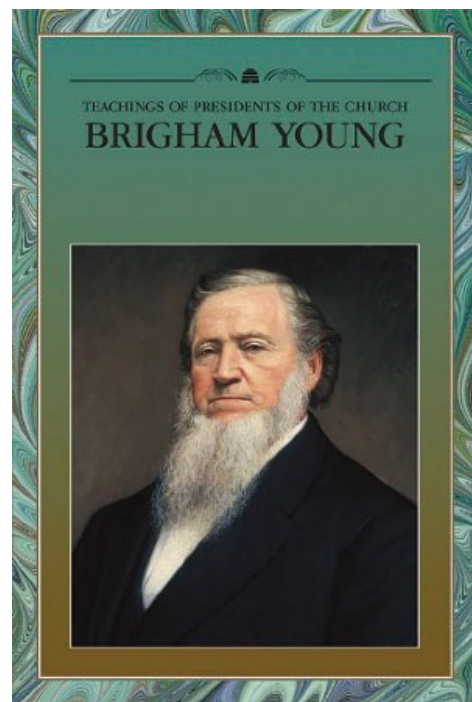
BRIGHAM YOUNG SUNDAY SCHOOL MANUAL

- In the Church's Sunday School manual, Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young, the Church changed the word "wives" to "[wife]."

The parenthetical insertion probably calls attention to Brigham's polygamy more than if it had been left unchanged. If the Church was really trying to whitewash, they would have just left off the S and not acknowledge that the text had been altered.

Not only is the manual deceptive in disclosing whether or not Brigham Young was a polygamist but it's deceptive in hiding Brigham Young's real teaching on marriage:

"The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy." – [Journal of Discourses 11:269](#)



We've covered this. In the same speech, he clarified twice that this meant you had to accept the doctrine of polygamy, not necessarily be a polygamist. Again, you would know that if you read your own source, which you haven't.

CENSORSHIP

In November 2013, Church Historian Elder Steven E. Snow acknowledged the Church's [censorship](#) ...

"Censorship" is a loaded term and not one that accurately characterizes what Elder Snow was saying here.

... and pointed to the advent of the internet as the contributing factor to the Church's inability to continue its pattern of hiding information and records from members and investigators.

All of the information that troubles you - like different First Vision accounts, rocks in hats, Book of Abraham information, a rock in a hat, hats with rocks in them, and rocks that are in hats - has been available for anyone who wanted it. What the Church has done is to push forward the information they think is faith-promoting and stay largely silent about the things they find embarrassing. That was the wrong approach, and, with the publication of [Saints](#), we've come a long way toward correcting that.

"I think in the past there was a tendency to keep a lot of the records closed or at least not give access to information. But the world has changed in the last generation—with the access to information on the Internet, we can't continue that pattern; I think we need to continue to be more open."

The lines prior to this give greater context, which may be why you ignore them:

My view is that being open about our history solves a whole lot more problems than it creates. We might not have all the answers, but if we are open (and we now have pretty remarkable transparency), then I think in the long run that will serve us well.

It's telling that almost all of your complaints about the Church include links to the Church's own websites to see the primary sources that you, yourself, haven't bothered to read. That's pretty lousy censorship.

2. CHURCH FINANCES

There is zero transparency to members of the Church.

Actually, there is complete transparency in the countries that require the Church to disclose its finances - namely, the UK and Canada.

But you know where there is zero financial transparency? The CES Letter Foundation. From the reports I've received, you're making a sizable six-figure income off of your shoddy scholarship. Don't your readers - and especially your donors - deserve to know precisely how much you're personally benefitting from all of this?

Why is the one and only true Church keeping its books in the dark? Why would God's one true Church choose to "[keep them in darkness](#)" over such a stewardship?

Why do you provide a really weird link to a scripture in Ether that talks about oaths used to keep murders secret? Are you equating the Church's unwillingness to release financial statements with deliberately killing people?

History has shown time and time again that secret religious wealth is breeding ground for corruption.

In your last version of your letter, you referred to "corporate secret wealth," not "secret religious wealth." The change is odd, as history doesn't have much to say about "secret religious wealth," because that's not an actual thing.

The Church used to be transparent with its finances but stopped in 1959.

Which means that they were transparent for 129 years longer than the CES Letter Foundation.

ESTIMATED \$1.5 BILLION MEGAMALL CITY CREEK CENTER:



Which was funded by a for-profit entity owned by the church and not paid for by tithes or offerings of church members.

- Total Church humanitarian aid from 1985-2011: \$1.4 billion

Your link works! It didn't in your last version. And if people click on it and actually read your

source - which you don't seem to have done - they'll realize that this is not the totality of all humanitarian aid that the Church gave from 1985-2011. It is the total of all the cash they donated to other agencies for the relief of international disasters.

The distinction is huge. That number does not include, for instance, the money and resources given to Church members in their welfare program, which is much larger than what the Church donates to other organizations. This article from TimesandSeasons.org addresses the importance of the distinction:

Look at that sheet again. It highlights numbers of food storehouses, food production for the needy, employment training, church-run thrift stores, and so on. The sheet states *_also_ discusses global work worldwide on disaster relief (such as responses to tsunami or earthquake victims). It uses different nomenclature for each type of donation. That is *donations to worldwide emergency response are classified under the humanitarian label. But the extensive ongoing infrastructure to feed the needy is classified under the church welfare label.* I contacted the church today and was able to verify that this is correct. [Emphasis in original]*

The Church's welfare program includes vast amounts of financial assistance, donated resources, and volunteer man-hours that are vastly in excess of the \$1.4 billion figure.

One other point on this. When I was writing an editorial for the Deseret News, I wrote a piece that slammed the Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton Foundation, because it was all over the news that they only donated a tiny portion of their money to charity. The paper got a call from the Clinton Foundation and asked me to talk to them. The man I spoke to very patiently and kindly described why the editorial was in error, particularly with regard to the difference between private *non-operating* foundations and private *operating* foundations.

Here's a [legal website](#) that explains the difference:

The IRS recognizes two types of private foundations: **private nonoperating foundations** and **private operating foundations**. Although the IRS uses a number of criteria to distinguish between the two, in practice, the key difference between a private nonoperating foundation and a private operating foundation is how each distributes its income:

- **A private nonoperating foundation** grants money to *other* charitable organizations. This is the more common type of private foundation. These foundations do not directly perform any charitable programs or services
- **A private operating foundation** distributes funds to *its own* programs that exist for charitable purposes. [Emphasis in original]

The Clinton guy explained that the Clinton Foundation is a private *operating* foundation. So when they get money, they don't give it to other charities; they spend it themselves for their own charitable programs.

That is essentially the way the Church operates. When members donate money for welfare purposes, the Church uses that money to fund its own in-house charitable operations, which are massive, efficient, and the envy of welfare relief agencies all across the world. In areas where they do not have a relief infrastructure to quickly respond to natural disasters, they

have donated cash to other organizations that do, such as the Red Cross.

So you continually cite this figure as the totality of all the welfare the Church provides, when the truth is that the Church provides welfare services that are demonstrably far in excess of this figure.

- Something is fundamentally wrong with “the one true Church” spending more on an estimated \$1.5 billion dollar high-end megamall than it has in 26 years of humanitarian aid.

No, something is wrong with your assumptions, which are woefully incorrect.

For an organization that claims to be Christ’s only true Church, this expenditure is a moral failure on so many different levels.

“On so many different levels” is one of those qualifiers that sounds intelligent but isn’t. You cite precisely one such “level” - the Church should spend more on helping people than on malls - but your criticism is based on a huge, whopping error on your part. So what other “levels” have you got?

For a Church that asks its members to sacrifice greatly for Temple building, such as the case of Argentiniains giving the Church gold from their dental work for the São Paulo Brazil Temple, this mall business is absolutely shameful.

The Church would have built the temple with or without the dental work donations. Members weren’t asked to pay a dime for the mall, and none of their donations, dental work or no, were used to fund it.

Of all the things that Christ would tell the prophet, the prophet buys a mall and says “Let’s go shopping!”? Of all the sum total of human suffering and poverty on this planet, the inspiration the Brethren feel for His Church is to get into the shopping mall business?!

The mall wasn’t built with the intent to get the Saints to “go shopping.” City Creek was designed to stave off the urban blight that was gripping downtown Salt Lake City, which would ultimately have placed Temple Square and the surrounding buildings that constitute the headquarters of the Church into the middle of a dangerous slum. City Creek has accomplished that goal by revitalizing downtown and making it safe for families. The fact that this was done without taxpayer or tithpayer dollars makes it a boon to the community that cost Church members nothing at all. It ultimately won’t even cost the Church anything either, as it’s going to make its money back over time.

PRESIDENT HINCKLEY’S DISHONEST INTERVIEW

Since we don’t have access to the full interview, it’s hard to characterize it definitively. Your YouTube link provides a short snippet without any context, which suggests that, like with all the other out-of-context garbage in the CES Letter, there’s much more to the story here.

Hinckley made the following dishonest statement in a 2002 interview to a German journalist:

Reporter: In my country, the...we say the people’s Churches, the Protestants, the Catholics, they publish all their budgets, to all the public.

Hinckley: Yeah. Yeah.

Reporter: Why is it impossible for your Church?

Hinckley: Well, we simply think that the...that information belongs to those who made the contribution, and not to the world. That's the only thing. Yes.

Not dishonest at all. President Hinckley's talking about the confidentiality of individual contributions, which should rightly remain private. I'm willing to bet that if we had more of this interview, we would be able to get a follow-up that would clarify if that's not what the journalist was really asking, or we might see a question before this one that would have provided the appropriate context for President Hinckley's answer.

Where can I see the Church's books? I've paid tithing.

Where can your donors see your books? They've paid you quite well.

Where can I go to see what the Church's finances are? Where can current tithing paying members go to see the books? The answer: we can't.

When I was a counselor in the bishopric, I was actually uncomfortable with how much I knew about the finances of ward members, based on my access to ward tithing and fast offering records. Much of that information is available to counselors and clerks, and it is remarkable to me how responsibly they handle that information. That information isn't the finances of the entire Church, of course, but my personal experience makes me more grateful for confidentiality than curious about the Church's books.

Even if you've made the contributions as President Hinckley stated above? Unless you're an authorized General Authority or senior Church employee in the accounting department with a Non-Disclosure Agreement? You're out of luck.

On the contrary, I could see all the tithing for every member of my ward, and I signed no agreement at all. I'm very grateful for how responsibly clerks and bishopric members handle such sensitive confidential information.

TITHING BEFORE RENT, WATER, ELECTRICITY, AND FEEDING YOUR FAMILY

Tithing: I find the following quote in the [December 2012 Ensign](#) very disturbing:

“If paying tithing means that you can't pay for water or electricity, pay tithing. If paying tithing means that you can't pay your rent, pay tithing. Even if paying tithing means that you don't have enough money to feed your family, pay tithing. The Lord will not abandon you.”

Ripped out of context, it is disturbing. In the article, this advice is given to someone who receives generous financial assistance from the Church in order to get back on their feet, assistance in a dollar amount in excess of the money they paid in tithing.

This despicably dangerous idea of tithing before feeding your family was further perpetuated

in the April 2017 General Conference by Elder Valeri Cordón:

“One day during those difficult times, I heard my parents discussing whether they should pay tithing or buy food for the children. On Sunday, I followed my father to see what he was going to do. After our church meetings, I saw him take an envelope and put his tithing in it. That was only part of the lesson. The question that remained for me was what we were going to eat.”

This is one of those faith-promoting stories where Elder Cordón talks about a miraculous financial blessing that comes as a result. Had such a blessing not materialized, he and his family would, like the previous example, have access to Church welfare programs to ensure that his family didn't starve. Do you have examples of people starving because they paid tithing? If you do, you might want to include them in your next version of the CES Letter. You may have trouble finding them, as I doubt they exist.

Would a loving, kind, and empathic God really place parents in the horrible position of having to choose whether to feed their children or pay what little they have to a multi-billion luxury megamall owning church that receives an estimated \$8,000,000,000 in annual tithing receipts?

The Church's welfare program ensures that Church members need not panic about feeding their children. And precisely \$0 of those tithing receipts went into the funding of City Creek.

“Well, God tested Abraham by asking him to kill his son and besides, the Lord will take care of them through the Bishop's storehouse.”

You put these words in quotes for some reason, despite the fact that no real person actually said this.

Yes, the same god who tested Abraham is also the same crazy god who killed innocent babies and endorsed genocide, slavery, and rape.

Quite the non sequitur there, especially in response to a stupid straw man argument that no one was making. The weirdness of Old Testament accounts does not deny anyone access to the bishop's storehouse.

Besides, whatever happened to self-sufficiency? Begging the Bishop for food when you had the money for food but because you followed the above Ensign advice and gave your food money to the Church you're now dependent on the Church for food money. If you give your food and rent money to the Church, you are not self-reliant...you are Church-reliant.

Just a few paragraphs ago, you were upset that the Church doesn't offer enough humanitarian aid, and now you're complaining that they offer too much aid and make people dependent. Which is it?

DISHONESTLY ALTERING LORENZO SNOW'S WORDS AND TEACHINGS ON TITHING

The Church took the Prophet Lorenzo Snow's 1899 General Conference Address words and deliberately omitted and replaced key words on tithing with ellipsis in its *Teachings of*

Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow manual.

Ellipses aren't an alteration of words, they're an acknowledgment that words have been removed. You can, however, alter meanings with ellipses, as you frequently do in the CES



Lorenzo Snow

"There is no man or woman who can not pay one tenth of what he or she receives."

Letter, such as where you distort Elder Anderson's remarks about the Prophet Joseph Smith's testimony. But that doesn't seem to be the case here.

This is what Lorenzo Snow said in his 1899 General Conference Address:

*"I plead with you in the name of the Lord, and I pray that every man, woman and child **who has means** shall pay one-tenth of their income as a tithing."*

Presentism is getting in your way here again. You are suggesting that President Snow was saying that only people who can afford to pay tithing should pay tithing. That is likely how a modern audience would read that phrase, but it is not at all how a 19th Century audience would have heard it.

Here is how Webster's Dictionary defined "means" in the 19th Century:

"Means, in the plural, income, revenue, resources, substance or estate, considered as the instrument of effecting any purpose."

In other words, if you gave any income, revenue, resources, substance or estate, pay tithing. Rather than exempting anyone, he was saying that anyone with anything should pay tithing. That meaning becomes clear elsewhere in his talk, where he says, "There is no man or woman who can not pay one tenth of what he or she receives." (That quote, incidentally, is in the same Teachings of Lorenzo Snow manual.)

Compare this to how the Church uses and presents Snow's exact same quote today in its *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow manual*:

"I plead with you in the name of the Lord, and I pray that every man, woman and child ... shall pay one-tenth of their income as a tithing."

Yes, because from the context of his remarks, was the substance of his message. Including the words left out by the ellipsis would invite presentist misinterpretation of his message.

The Church dishonestly alters and completely changes Lorenzo Snow's words and teaching on tithing by removing "who has means" from his 1899 General Conference quote in its *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* manual.

On the contrary, the Church honestly sustains President's Snow's words and teachings by avoiding CES Letter-style presentism that distorts his teachings.

In 2012, a Latter-day Saint published an eye-opening blog post that went viral among Internet Mormons: [*Are We Paying Too Much Tithing?*](#)

Sorry, what's an "Internet Mormon?" Church members all over the world have access to the Internet, so this isn't actually a thing.

The article demonstrates how what is currently taught and practiced is contrary to how it was taught and practiced by the Prophet Joseph Smith and subsequent prophets...

I do not sustain the author of this article as a Prophet, Seer, or Revelator, so I will continue to heed prophetic counsel rather than the private opinion of bloggers.

... including Lorenzo Snow; whose above quote was deceptively altered and manipulated for today's tithe-paying members.

Nope. Maybe you should have mentioned the rock in the hat again instead.

2. NAMES OF THE CHURCH

A much more timely objection now than when you first wrote it, methinks.

1830: CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST
1834: THE CHURCH OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS
1838: THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

After revealing "Church of Jesus Christ" on April 6, 1830...

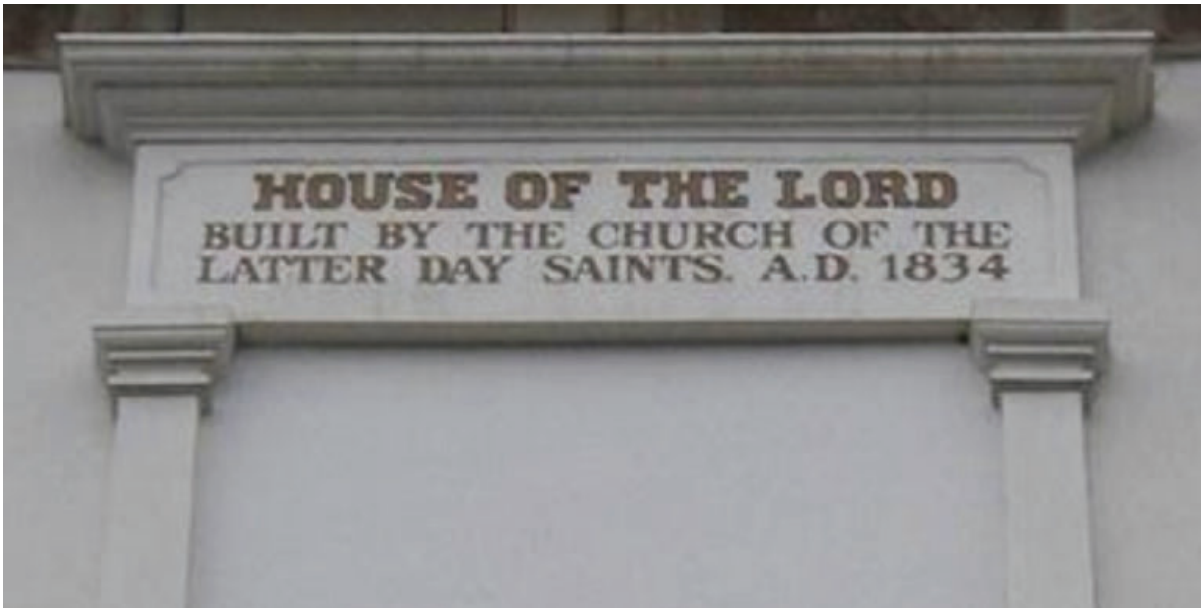
In your last version of your letter, the verb you used here was "deciding," not "revealing." The difference is significant. There is no record of a revelation official naming the Church prior to 1838. Your previous verb, therefore, was more accurate than this one.

... Joseph Smith made the decision on May 3, 1834 to change the name of the Church to "The Church of the Latter Day Saints". Why did Joseph take the name of "Jesus Christ" out of the very name of His restored Church? The one and only true Church on the face of the earth in which Christ is the Head?

Because there was already a church with the legal right to use the name "Church of Christ" that precluded Joseph from doing the same. (You say that they called themselves the "Church of Jesus Christ," but from what I can tell, the name "Jesus" was absent from the original moniker.) So, absent any revelation, Joseph chose a name that would distinguish themselves

from the other Church. The first time a name was given by revelation was in 1838, and that name, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” is the same name the Church has consistently used from that day to this.

KIRTLAND TEMPLE



Four years later on April 26, 1838, the Church name was changed to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints” and has remained ever since (except the hyphen was added later to be grammatically correct).

Indeed. As I stated at the outset, I’m not concerned about fallible grammar.

Is it reasonable to assume that God would periodically change the name of his Church?

No, which means you are unreasonable in making that assumption. You do not have evidence that God periodically changed the name of his Church,. The first time we have record of God naming His Church is in 1838, and there have been no changes to the name since the Lord Himself settled the question.

If Jesus Christ is the central character of God’s religion on earth and all things are to be done in His name, is it reasonable to assume that God would instruct His Church leaders to entirely leave out the name of Jesus Christ from the period of May 3, 1834 – April 26, 1838?

There is no evidence that God instructed His Church leaders about the name of the Church prior to 1838.

What possible reason could there be for the name changes?

Joseph Smith named the Church absent revelation and then settled on a permanent name when God revealed it. Pretty simple.

Why would Christ instruct Joseph to name it one thing in 1830 and then change it in 1834 and then change it again in 1838?

He wouldn't and didn't.

Why would the name of Christ be dropped from His one and only true Church for 4 whole years?

Because another church was using the name "Church of Christ," which prevented Joseph from using it.

What does this say about a Church that claims to be restored and guided by modern revelation?

It says that we do our best in the absence of direct guidance from heaven, but we don't mess with the Lord after he provides a revelation with a definitive answer.

3. ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

“SOME THINGS THAT ARE TRUE ARE NOT VERY USEFUL ”

Whereas when it comes to the CES Letter's arguments, some things that are useful are not very true.

Elder Boyd K. Packer gave a talk to Church Educational System Instructors and faculty at a CES Symposium on August 22, 1981 entitled *The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect*.

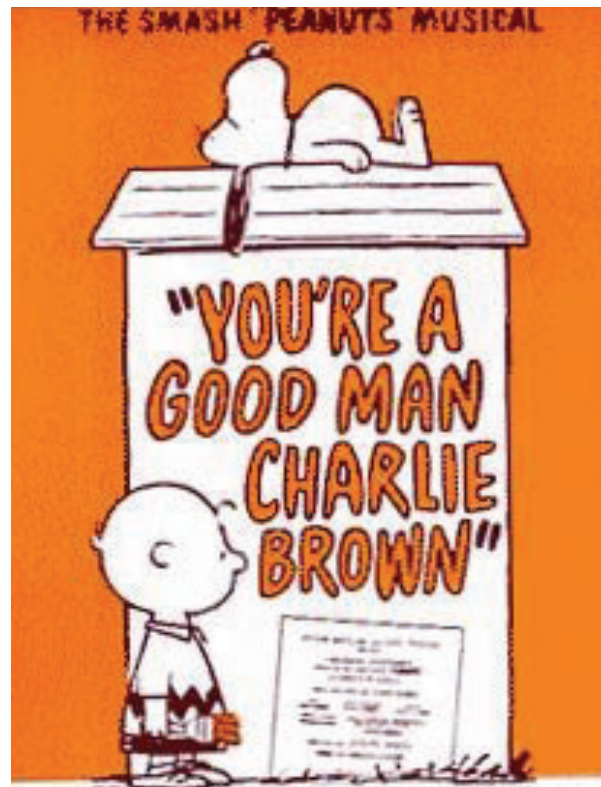
Elder Packer said the following:

“There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not. Some things that are true are not very useful.”

And I really wish he hadn't said this, as it is open to the kind of misinterpretation you're applying to it. Because when you consider the intent of his statement rather than his poor choice of words, this becomes a rather artless way of stating an undeniably true – and useful – principle.

In fact, the CES Letter is a perfect example of Elder Packer's premise. Your purpose is to persuade people that the LDS Church is a fraud, so you cite truths that are useful to making that case, and you ignore the truths that are not. So you cite three different dubious hearsay statements about Martin Harris and repeat them over a dozen times, but you ignore the dozens of more reliable firsthand accounts that undermine your case, because those statements, while true, aren't useful to your purpose. (Actually, the analogy isn't really perfect, because the statements you quoted about Martin probably aren't true. But I'm sure you get the idea.)

The word “useful” is instructive, especially when you consider the audience to whom Elder Packer’s remarks were addressed. He wasn’t talking to the general membership of the Church in Conference; he was talking to a gathering of CES instructors, who are in the employ of the Church for the specific purpose of building the faith of LDS youth. There are many truths that are not useful to that specific purpose. It is true, for instance, that I played the role of Schroeder in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” in several productions in the Los Angeles area between 1981 and 1985. Is this true? Yes. It is a useful fact for CES Employees to use in their instruction of LDS youth? Probably not, no.



*I was in this show!
A true and useless fact*

Elder Dallin H. Oaks made a similar comment in the context of Church history at a CES Symposium on August 16, 1985 :

“The fact that something is true is not always justification for communicating it.”

That is quite good advice. Telling a child that they are physically repugnant, for instance, is not a good idea, even if it is true.

Joseph using a rock in a hat instead of the gold plates to translate the Book of Mormon is not a useful truth?

A what in a what now?

Elder Packer probably didn’t think that was a useful truth at the time, no. I think he was wrong about that, and the Church has recognized that mistake. That’s why Elder Ballard’s more recent talk to a similar audience of CES employees took the opposite approach to Elder Packer’s. This time around, Elder Ballard counseled them to know all the details of the recent gospel topics essays “like the back of your hand” in order to be able to provide true and useful information that allows the Church to get out in front of these controversial issues. And, yes, that includes your beloved rock in a hat.

And, again, the recent publication of *Saints* shows a willingness to confront all of the truths that trouble you, useful or not.

The fact that there are multiple conflicting first vision accounts is not a useful truth?

It’s more useful to demonstrate the truth that the accounts don’t actually conflict.

The fact that Joseph Smith was involved in polyandry while hiding it from Emma, when D&C 132:61 condemns it as “adultery,” is not a useful truth?

No, because it’s not a truth. Joseph Smith wasn’t involved in polyandry. (Sealings, not marriage, no sex.) It would be useful, however, for CES instructors to point out the true reasons why this charge you continually repeat is not accurate.

Elder Packer continues:

“That historian or scholar who delights in pointing out the weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders destroys faith. A destroyer of faith – particularly one within the Church, and more particularly one who is employed specifically to build faith – places himself in great spiritual jeopardy.”

Again, this is not the way I’d choose to teach this principle, but Elder Packer was entirely correct here. Look at the verb he uses – “delights.” It’s one thing for a historian or scholar to acknowledge or plainly state the “weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders,” especially if they do so in context and with an appropriate sense of balance. It’s another thing to “delight” in discussing those weaknesses above all else, as such an approach will paint a distorted picture of reality and, yes, destroy faith. It also would, indeed, place someone in spiritual jeopardy, as they would destroy their own faith, too.

If facts and truths can destroy faith...what does it say about faith?

It says that you misunderstand both what faith is and what facts are. The CES Letter is built on the shoddy premise that truth is self-interpreting and cannot be viewed from multiple points of view. That’s nonsense. Facts are always open to interpretation, and faith cannot withstand a deliberate bias in favor of a hostile narrative that always presumes the worst of early Church members.

If prophets of the Church conducted themselves in such a way that it can destroy faith, what does this say about the prophets?

That they have agency, are fallible, and are in need of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, just like everybody else.

What’s interesting about Elder Packer’s above quote is that he’s focusing on history from the point of view that a historian is only interested in the “weaknesses and frailties of present and past leaders.”

It is interesting, yes, because he’s criticizing the kind of shoddy history you’re presenting in the CES Letter - a history designed to highlight the worst and deliberately omit the best.

Historians are also interested in things like how the Book of Mormon got translated or how many accounts Joseph gave about the foundational first vision or whether the Book of Abraham even matches the papyri and facsimiles.

And those historians, by and large, are quite pleased with *Saints*, the newly published history that tackles all of those issues head on.

Besides, it matters in the religious context what past and present leaders “weaknesses and frailties” are.

Context matters a great deal, yes, which is why it’s disturbing that you’re determined to ignore context whenever it doesn’t advance your hostile narrative of the Church’s origins.

If Joseph’s public position was that adultery and polygamy are morally wrong and condemned by God, what does it say about him and his character that he did exactly that in the dark while lying to Emma and everyone else about it?

It says you are misrepresenting history and, in this instance, not telling the truth.

How is this not a useful truth?

Because it’s not true.

A relevant hypothetical example to further illustrate this point: The prophet or one of the apostles gets caught with child pornography on his hard drive.

I can think of few things that would be more unlikely.



A Religious Hat, Sans Rock
Not exempt from history

This matters, especially in light of his current position, status, and teachings on morality.

It doesn’t matter, because it hasn’t happened.

Just because a leader wears a religious hat does not follow that they’re exempt from history and accountability from others.

Does the hat have a rock in it?

Nobody is saying that religious leaders are exempt from accountability, and it’s not really possible to be “exempt from history.”

Further, testimonies are acquired in part by the recitation of a historical narrative.

They are also destroyed by the creation of false, poorly researched, and hostile narratives like the one in the CES Letter.

Missionaries recite the narrative about Joseph Smith searching and praying for answers, about acquiring the gold plates and translating the Book of Mormon, about the Priesthood being restored along with other foundational narratives.

What missionaries teach is nowhere near a comprehensive telling of Church history, nor is it intended to be. They offer a brand sketch, and, if they don't depart from the program to talk about weird things like the supposedly legally binding nature of the Three Witnesses, the relatively few details they provide are entirely accurate.

Why should investigators and members not learn the correct and candid version of that historical narrative, for better or for worse?

They should. *Saints* provides that splendidly. What they should not learn is the incorrect and deliberately hostile version of the narrative found in the CES Letter.

Are members and investigators not entitled to a truthful accounting of the real origins of Mormonism?

Yes, and they get nothing like that in the CES Letter.

The question should not be whether it's faith promoting or not to share ugly but truthful facts. The question should be: Is it the honest thing to do?

That's a question that ought to be asked more of CES Letter content, so I'll do precisely that going forward.

CRITICIZING LEADERS

Elder Dallin H. Oaks made the following disturbing comment in the PBS documentary, *The Mormons*:

"It is wrong to criticize the leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true."

The full quote here is helpful:

*"I also said something else that has excited people: that it's wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true, because it diminishes their effectiveness as a servant of the Lord. **One can work to correct them by some other means**, but don't go about saying that they misbehaved when they were a youngster or whatever." [Emphasis added]*

As with Elder Packer's statement, this is something I wish Elder Oaks hadn't said, as it, too, is open to misinterpretation. In addition, the snippet you link to is a sort of "preview of coming attractions" for the next episode of the series, so in that footage, the one sentence gets yanked out of any surrounding context and is even more susceptible to being misunderstood. You're always eager to provide less context instead of more. Is that the honest thing to do?

His point is not, as many critics imply, that the church does not tolerate disagreement. It is that public criticism, especially that which is focused on how they “misbehaved as a youngster or whatever,” is the wrong way to handle disagreements. One should “work to correct them by some other means” other than publicly embarrassing leaders, especially on irrelevant points that are discussed solely with the intent to embarrass.

This is actually a Biblical principle. “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault **between thee and him alone**: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” (Matthew 18:15, emphasis added)

RESEARCHING “UNAPPROVED” MATERIALS ON THE INTERNET

In this section, you consistently put words in quotes like “UNAPPROVED,” above, without providing any evidence of people actually using those words. You have no examples of any General Authority criticizing members for looking at “Unapproved” materials, yet you have supposedly quoted somebody saying precisely that. Is that the honest thing to do?

Elder Quentin L. Cook made the following comment in the [October 2012](#) Conference:

“Some have immersed themselves in internet materials that magnify, exaggerate, and in some cases invent shortcomings of early Church leaders. Then they draw incorrect conclusions that can affect testimony. Any who have made these choices can repent and be spiritually renewed.”

Notice that Quentin L. Cook did not use the word “unapproved” or anything like it. His counsel – don’t “immerse” yourself in materials that provide distorted or false information – is good counsel. Do you advocate immersion in materials that provide distorted or false information?

Elder Dieter Uchtdorf said the following in his CES talk “[What is Truth?](#)” (33:00):

“...Remember that in this age of information there are many who create doubt about anything and everything at any time and every place. You will find even those who still claim that they have evidence that the earth is flat. That the moon is a hologram. It looks like it a little bit. And that certain movie stars are really aliens from another planet. And it is always good to keep in mind just because something is printed on paper, appears on the internet, is frequently repeated or has a powerful group of followers doesn’t make it true.”

With which part of this entirely reasonable, common-sense statement do you disagree? And why do you cite this as evidence that the Church is cracking down on “unapproved” materials when President Uchtdorf doesn’t use that word or anything like it?

Why does it matter whether information was received from a stranger, television, book, magazine, comic book, napkin, and yes, the internet?

Certainly not Elder Cook or President Uchtdorf in the quotes you cite. There is no counsel here to avoid any medium of information; the counsel is to make sure that information is true, regardless of where it is found.

They are all mediums or conduits of information. It's the information itself, its accuracy, and its relevance that matters.

Which is precisely what both Elder Cook and President Uchtdorf say in the quotes you provide. Neither of them counsel members to avoid the Internet.

Elder Neil Andersen made the following statement in the [October 2014 General Conference](#) specifically targeting the medium of the Internet in a bizarre attempt to discredit the Internet as a reliable source for getting factual and truthful information:

“We might remind the sincere inquirer that Internet information does not have a ‘truth’ filter. Some information, no matter how convincing, is simply not true.”

How is this “specifically targeting the medium of the Internet?” It's specifically targeting information that is not true. In the same talk, Elder Andersen mentions false information that appeared in Time Magazine. Are we to interpret that as Elder Andersen specifically targeting Time Magazine? I don't think so.

Here's what the Brethren have to say about the Internet:



“We are blessed to live, learn, and serve in this most remarkable dispensation. An important aspect of the fulness that is available to us in this special season is a miraculous progression of innovations and inventions that have enabled and accelerated the work of salvation: from trains to telegraphs to radios to automobiles to airplanes to telephones to transistors to televisions to computers to satellite transmissions to the Internet—and to an almost endless list of technologies and tools that bless our lives. All of these advancements are part of the Lord hastening His work in the latter days.

- Elder David A. Bednar, [To Sweep the Earth](#), BYU Education Week 2014

“Whatever the question is, if we need more information, we search it online. In seconds we have a lot of material. This is marvelous. The Internet provides many opportunities for learning.”

- If Ye Lack Wisdom, by Marcos A. Aidukaitis (First Quorum of the Seventy), April 2014 General Conference

“You live in a world where technological advances occur at an astounding pace. It is difficult for many of my generation to keep up with the possibilities. Depending on how technology is used, these advances can be a blessing or a deterrent. Technology, when understood and used for righteous purposes, need not be a threat but rather an enhancement to spiritual communication.”

-For Peace At Home, by Richard G. Scott (Quorum of the Twelve Apostles). April 2013 General Conference

And on it goes. Nowhere can you find any reference where the Brethren denounce “unapproved” Internet materials. You are making an accusation that your citations don’t in any way support. Is that the honest thing to do?

UPDATE: Ironically, the only way for members to directly read the Church’s admissions and validations of yesterday’s “anti-Mormon lies” is by going on the internet to the Gospel Topics Essays section of the Church’s website.

This would only be ironic if the Church had ever counseled its members to avoid the Internet, which is something it has never done.

The essays and their presence on lds.org have disturbed and shocked many members – some to the point of even believing that the Church’s website has been hacked.

Examples, please? This is a ridiculous, empty charge with no evidence to support it.

With all this talk from General Authorities against the internet...

You have provided precisely zero evidence of talk from General Authorities against the Internet.

...and daring to be balanced by looking at what both defenders and critics are saying about the Church...

You have provided precisely zero evidence of talk from General Authorities against looking at what both defenders and critics are saying about the Church.

... it is as if questioning and researching and doubting is now the new pornography.

It is? I can find a great deal of statements from General Authorities decrying the old pornography, but not a single statement making any of the claims you’re making. This is an absurd analogy.

Truth has no fear of the light.

Agreed. Which is why General Authorities are encouraging members to seek truth and not falsehood in the statements you've provided.

President George A. Smith said,

“If a faith will not bear to be investigated; if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak.”

Correct. You've provided no examples of General Authorities discouraging investigation of their faith.

A church that is afraid to let its people determine for themselves truth and falsehood in an open market is a church that is insecure and afraid of its own truth claims.

It is also a church that bears no resemblance to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Under Cook's counsel, FairMormon and unofficial LDS apologetic websites are anti-Mormon sources that should be avoided.

That's like saying “the sky is green.” Elder Cook said nothing that could possibly be tortured into meaning this.

Not only do they introduce to Mormons “internet materials that magnify, exaggerate, and in some cases invent shortcoming of early Church leaders...”

Elder Cook's verb was “immersed,” not “introduce.” Big, big difference. FairMormon does not immerse people in material that magnifies, exaggerates, or invents shortcomings of early Church leaders.

... but they provide asinine “faithful answers” with logical fallacies and omissions while leaving members confused and hanging with a bizarre version of Mormonism.

The logical fallacies and omissions that have piled up in the CES Letter give this accusation a “mote v. beam” vibe.

What about the disturbing information about early Church leaders and the Church which are not magnified, or exaggerated, or invented?

What about it? All the statements you cite here encourage people to seek truth and not falsehood. We have nothing to fear from truth, no matter where it's found.

What about the disturbing facts that didn't come from the flat-earthers or moon-hologramers but instead from the Church itself?

Elder Ballard's 2016 talk insists that you should learn as much as you possibly can about them.

Church leaders today are fully conscious of the unlimited access to information, and we are making extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding of the teachings of the Restoration. A prime example of this effort is the 11 Gospel Topics essays on LDS.org that provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar Church-related subjects.

It is important that you know the content in these essays like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, then please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. In other words, “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” as you master the content of these essays.

You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Church history section on LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.

The effort for gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and/or deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.

– M. Russell Ballard, “*The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century*,” February 26, 2016

Are those facts invalid when someone discovers them on the internet?

No, and furthermore, no General Authority has ever said that they are.

What happens when a member comes across the Church's *Book of Mormon Translation essay* where they learn – for the first time in their lives – that the Book of Mormon was not translated with gold plates as depicted in Sunday Schools, Ensigns, MTC, General Conference addresses, or Visitor Centers?

Rock-in-hat-rock-in-hat-rock-in-hat?

Depends on the person, I guess. You and I certainly reacted differently. In any case, we're about to find out, as the Church is making a concerted effort to get this information in front of as many members as possible.

Or the Church's *Race and the Priesthood* essay where yesterday's prophets, seers, and revelators are thrown under the bus over their now disavowed “theories”?

Again, the Church is now actively pushing this information to the membership, so we're about to find out.

Or the *Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham essay* and that the Book of Abraham and its facsimiles do not match what Joseph Smith translated?

It will be much better than when they get the story in the CES Letter's plagiarized pseudo-scholarship from the musical director of *Saturday's Voyeur*.

Or the *Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo essay* where they learn the real origins of polygamy and the disturbing details of how Joseph practiced it?

Or the sections in *Saints* that confront this head on, too, and provide context that is deliberately and dishonestly excluded from the CES Letter?

That Joseph was married to other living men's wives and young girls as young as 14-years-old behind Emma's back?

Which isn't true, as the essay makes clear?

That God sent an angel with a drawn sword threatening Joseph?

In a context quite different from the distorted one presented in the CES Letter?

Or any of the other troubling essays, for that matter?

Essays that show that, far from counseling members to avoid the Internet, the Church is doing everything in its power put its whole story and all primary documents online in order to be as open as possible? The Church is going full throttle towards full transparency. You're going to have to find a new line of attack.

Is this member in need of repentance for discovering and being troubled by all the inconsistencies and deceptions?

I wasn't, as I didn't consider it inconsistency and deception. And no General Authority said that doubts make anyone in need of repentance.

President Uchtdorf said:

It's natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty.

Why is the member required to repent for discovering verifiable facts and for coming to the same logical conclusion about the LDS Church's dominant narrative that Mormon historian, scholar, and patriarch Richard Bushman did?

“The dominant narrative is not true. It can't be sustained.”

You seem to be under the impression that quoting Richard Bushman out of context multiple times will somehow make him agree with you. He doesn't agree with you, and this doesn't mean what you repeatedly and erroneously insist it means. Richard Bushman remains a

faithful, believing member of the Church. If people come to the same logical conclusions he has come to, they, too, will be faithful and believing members of the Church.

Most of the main information and facts that I discovered and confirmed online about the Church is now found from Church sources, Church-friendly sources, and neutral sources.

Except you have woefully distorted and misinterpreted that information, and many of your sources quoted in the CES Letter are sources you haven't even bothered to read. Is that the honest thing to do?

“And it is always good to keep in mind just because something is printed on paper, appears on the Internet, is frequently repeated or has a powerful group of followers doesn't make it true.” Exactly - the exact same can be said of Mormonism and lds.org.

Yes. The exact same thing can be said of any information found anywhere.

THE SEPTEMBER SIX

“The September Six were six members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were excommunicated or disfellowshipped by the Church in September 1993, allegedly for publishing scholarly work on Mormonism or critiquing Church doctrine or leadership.”

Who are you quoting? Is this a real person or more “unapproved”-style strawman nonsense?

I find it telling that to illustrate the idea the Church routinely goes after members who “publish or share their questions, concerns, and doubts,” you have to reach back 25 years to find actual examples. If this really were an ongoing practice or concern, surely there'd be a great deal more support for your allegation.

In any case, the September Six are now the September Four, as two of these scholars have rejoined the Church in full fellowship. They continue to function as both scholars and faithful members of the Church.

A few months before the September Six, Elder Boyd K. Packer made the following comment regarding the three “enemies” of the Church:

“The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new), and the ever present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals.”
– Boyd K. Packer, All-Church Coordinating Council, May 18, 1993

You're insinuating that Elder Packer ordered these excommunications, but there is no evidence that this is true, despite decades of innuendo to that effect. Even if Elder Packer was engaged in a systematic crackdown on Mormon scholars, you'd think that he'd have more than six excommunications to his credit over the course of so many years.

STRENGTHENING THE CHURCH
MEMBERS COMMITTEE (SCMC)

The spying and monitoring arm of the Church.

That's rather melodramatic.

It is secretive...

Indeed! So secretive that the First Presidency issued a public statement affirming its existence and purpose in the Church News in 1992.

Here's the statement.

First Presidency statement cites scriptural mandate for Church committee

Generally, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not respond to criticism levied against its work. But in light of extensive publicity recently given to false accusations of so-called secret Church committees and files, the First Presidency has issued the following statement:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was established in 1830 following the appearance of God the Father and Jesus Christ to the Prophet Joseph Smith in upstate New York. This sacred event heralded the onset of the promised 'restitution of all things.' Many instructions were subsequently given to the Prophet including Section 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants:" `And again, we would suggest for your consideration the propriety of all the saints gathering up a knowledge of all the facts, and sufferings and abuses put upon them. . . .

And also of all the property and amount of damages which they have sustained, both of character and personal injuries. . . .

And also the names of all persons that have had a hand in their oppressions, as far as they can get hold of them and find them out.

And perhaps a committee can be appointed to find out these things, and to take statements and affidavits; and also to gather up the libelous publications that are afloat;

And all that are in the magazines, and in the encyclopedias, and all the libelous histories that are published...(Verses 1-5.)'

Leaders and members of the Church strive to implement commandments of the Lord including this direction received in 1839. Because the Church has a non-professional clergy, its stake presidents and bishops have varied backgrounds and training. In order to assist their members who have questions, these local leaders often request information from General Authorities of the Church.

The Strengthening Church Members Committee was appointed by the First Presidency to help fulfill this need and to comply with the cited section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This committee serves as a resource to priesthood leaders throughout the world who may desire assistance on a wide variety of topics. It is a General Authority committee, currently comprised of Elder James E. Faust and Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. They work through established priesthood channels, and neither impose nor direct Church disciplinary action.

Members who have questions concerning Church doctrine, policies, or procedures have been counseled to discuss those concerns confidentially with their local leaders. These leaders are deeply aware of their obligation to counsel members wisely in the spirit of love, in order to strengthen their faith in the Lord and in His great latter-day work.

– The First Presidency

... and most members have been unaware of its existence since its creation in 1985 after Ezra Taft Benson became president.

Actually, it looks like various versions of this committee have been around since Section 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received in 1839.

[Elder Jeffrey R. Holland admitted it still exists in March 2012.](#)

The transcript of that admission:

John Sweeney: What is the Strengthening Church Members Committee?

Elder Holland: The Strengthening Church Members Committee was born some years ago to protect against predatory practices of polygamists.

Sweeney: I asked what it is, not was.

Holland: That is what it is...

Sweeney: So it does still exist?

Holland: It does still exist...it does still exist...

Sweeney: And it.... looks at....it's there to defend the church against polygamists?

Holland: Principally, that is still its principal task.

Sweeney: So what is its subsidiary task?

Holland: I just.... suppose to.... to be protective generally, just to watch and to care for any insidious influence. But for all intents and purposes, that's all that I know

about it...is that it's primarily there to guard against polygamy. That would be the substantial part of the work. I'm not on that committee so I don't know much about it.

The historical evidence and the September Six points to SCMC's primary mission being to hunt and expose intellectuals and/or disaffected members who are influencing other members to think and question, despite Elder Holland's claim that it's a committee primarily to fight against polygamy.

You therefore have a responsibility to provide that historical evidence. You don't, suggesting that the evidence does not exist and you're making this up. Is that the honest thing to do?

“WHEN THE PROPHET SPEAKS THE
DEBATE IS OVER ”

Correct.

N. Eldon Tanner, first counselor in the First Presidency, gave a First Presidency Message in the August 1979 Ensign that includes the following statement:

“When the prophet speaks the debate is over.”

In practice, he's absolutely right. The Church does not function as a democracy. Members do not debate and vote on doctrines or policies, and we do not change doctrines or policies by debating our prophets, who ultimately have the final say on such things.

Some things that are true are not very useful...

Which you deliberately misinterpret,

+ Censorship...

Which you mischaracterize as censorship when it is not,

+ Deceptively altering past quotes...

Which didn't happen,

+ Prioritizing tithing before food and shelter...

Which is a gross distortion,

+ It is wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true...

Which you rip out of context,

+ Spying and monitoring on members...

For which you provide no evidence,

+ [Intellectuals are dangerous...](#)

Which is deceptively altering Elder Packer's quote, as he said "so-called" intellectuals. He was making to those dissidents who hide behind intellectual credentials. The Church adores faithful intellectuals. What was the mighty Hugh Nibley if not an intellectual?

+ ["us versus them" rhetoric...](#)

Which is all over the CES Letter,

+ [When the prophet speaks the debate is over...](#)

We just covered this,

+ [Obedience is the First Law of Heaven...](#)

That's an ancient biblical principle. What's wrong with it?

= [Policies and practices you'd expect to find in a totalitarian system such as North Korea or George Orwell's 1984; not from the gospel of Jesus Christ.](#)

My guess is, like most of your sources, you haven't read *1984*. When first responding to your letter, I had just re-watched the John Hurt/Richard Burton film adaptation of that seminal work. (And yes, it was an R-rated movie.) My memory was fresh enough to recognize this as a ridiculously hyperbolic comparison. At what point have Church leaders set up video monitoring screens in all members houses to enforce orthodoxy under threat of torture by means of a bucket of rats attached to their faces until they publicly confess to non-existent crimes?

The North Korea comparison is equally absurd. Were the September Six sentenced to gulags where they were worked and starved to death? Are rank-and-file members hauled off to such camps when they take down the framed pictures of the prophet that they are required by law to have on display in their homes at all times? By using this kind of hyperbolic, inflammatory language, you demean the actual victims of such totalitarian nightmares and deliberately misrepresent the Church. Is that the honest thing to do?

[As a believing member, I was deeply offended by the accusation that the Church was a cult. "How can it be a cult when we're good people who are following Christ, focusing on family, and doing good works in and out of a church that bears His name? When we're 15 million members? What a ridiculous accusation."](#)

It's made even more ridiculous by the fact that you don't seem to know what a cult is.

The word "cult" is objectively meaningless. It used to have reference to any religion and was essentially a measure of size – i.e. a cult is "a small group of religious followers." In today's

vernacular, though, the word “cult” is reserved for spurious or unorthodox religions that deserve scorn and ridicule.

People who throw the word “cult” around with regularity and think they’re saying something factual are simply telling you which religions they don’t like.

The best and most useful definition of “cult” came from my brilliant high school government teacher, Lee Shagin, who put it thusly:

“A cult is someone else’s religion.”

It was only after seeing all of the problems with the Church’s foundational truth claims and discovering, for the first time, the SCMC and the anti-intellectualism going on behind the scenes that I could clearly see the above cultish aspects of the Church and why people came to the conclusion that Mormonism is a cult.

Walter Martin, arguably the most influentially vitriolic critic of the LDS Church in the 20th Century, wrote a book titled “The Kingdom of the Cults” in which he derided several different groups that went afoul of his thinking of what Christianity ought to be. However, in order to begin mudslinging at all the cults he despised, he had to have an ironclad definition of same to anchor the discussion.

The problem was that every part of Martin’s definition could also be applied to early Christianity. All cults, according to Martin, follow a charismatic leader and insist that they’re the only way to heaven. They require sacrifices; they have their own vocabulary. Sounds like he’s describing all those folks following Jesus of Nazareth circa 33 AD. In fact, it also sounds quite a bit like the defenders of the CES Letter and the supporters of the CES Letter Foundation.

[Here’s a fun piece](#) about how John Dehlin’s organization can be defined as a cult, using Zelph on the Shelf’s definition of the term.

So you and Walter Martin can do all you want to try and clarify what a cult is, but ultimately, Lee Shagin’s definition is the better one.

In any case, the way you’re using the word “cult” in connection with 1984 and North Korea suggests you see the Church as some kind of prison that wreaks great havoc on dissidents. But that’s demonstrably nonsense. The fact is that the Church welcomes all, and it also allows all to leave.

This is no totalitarian state; you’re not going to get shot on your way out. As soon as you resign your membership, a simple process that only requires a single letter to your bishop, you will be free and clear. No one will follow you; no one will spy on you, and no one will punish you. Even those assigned to minister to you will leave you alone.

You’ve resigned your membership, so you know this to be true. You now realize by your own personal experience that no 1984 tactics have been employed to bring you back into the fold. There is the likelihood, however, that your Mormon friends and family will still love and care for you and pray on your behalf, but, alas, such kindness can’t really be stopped.