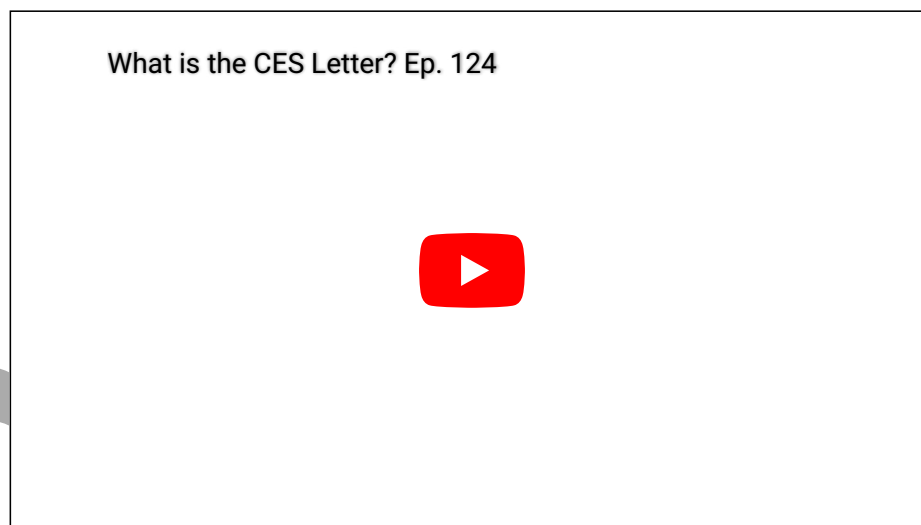


## What Is the CES Letter?

Jun 24, 2021 | Living the Gospel, The Gospel of Jesus Christ | 0 comments



Hey guys! So we've gotten a few messages recently asking us if we know about this document that's been floating around called the CES Letter. Yes, yes we do. Let's talk about it.

In February of 2012, a Latter-day Saint named Jeremy Runnells was experiencing a faith crisis. He ran into things, mostly about Church history, that he hadn't heard before that rattled his testimony. By summertime, he no longer believed in the truth claims of the Church.

The next year Jeremy's Latter-day Saint grandfather put him in contact with a friend who worked for the Church Education System. He was a "CES" Director. The CES Director asked Jeremy to send him a list of issues that had caused him to lose his faith, with the intention of helping him out. Jeremy's response was an 84-page document that came to be known as the "CES Letter." The CES Director apparently never got around to responding. Jeremy made the Letter available online. It has since been updated for a public audience. The full document is now 138 pages, and now the Letter is "no longer about getting answers from the LDS Church," but rather to call attention to this information that he claims the Church "does not want its members and investigators to know." And long story short, it's caused some people to leave the Church.

Now, in a past episode, I mentioned that it's extremely hard to find unbiased information about the Church, because most all of the people that care about doing the research are people with some kind of investment in the

interpretation of that research, for better or worse. The CES Letter is no exception. Jeremy is very clear about where he stands in the introduction to the Letter: “Obviously, I’m a disaffected member who lost his testimony so it’s no secret which side I’m on at the moment.” Thus, those who read the Letter should not be expecting to find reasons to believe. Inspiring belief was never the purpose of the Letter.

But what topics does the Letter actually bring up? Currently, the document is divided into 13 chapters (minus the conclusion, source notes, and epilogue) that each focus on a different category of various issues. None of the issues brought up in these chapters is new, though some may be new to *you*. Many criticisms are several decades old. Some even date back to literature critical of the Church from Joseph Smith’s own era, but the CES Letter essentially distills all of the main criticisms against the Church into one publicly available online document.

If you’re interested in more than the critical viewpoint, there are also plenty of Latter-day Saint resources that explore these issues. For example, if you’re familiar with this Faith and Beliefs segment of Saints Unscripted, [1] you’re probably already familiar with a good portion of what the Letter brings up. And if you want to watch some of our videos that happen to cover some of the same topics as the CES Letter, feel free to check out this playlist. [2] You’ve also got resources like the Church’s new history volumes, *Saints*, the gospel topics essays, BYU Studies, the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, or the Joseph Smith Papers Project. There are also countless excellent non-official sources you can check out.

The CES Letter makes hundreds upon hundreds of claims. Whether intended or not, sometimes what the Letter does is simply overwhelm readers with so much negative information that they’re thrown into a panic before really taking a deep breath and investigating individual claims. And that’s fairly understandable, as the average person might not know how to go about researching these topics, or may not have the patience for it.

Some of the information in the Letter is simply true. Some, as far as I can tell, is patently false (and hopefully those are honest mistakes). And I think some information [3] lacks important nuance or leaves out additional relevant information. It takes a lot of familiarity with these topics to be able to recognize where things might be out of place. Please don’t make the mistake of thinking that a few pages or paragraphs on a topic are all there is to it. The Letter even strongly urges readers to go out and do their own research. I echo that invitation. Please, take the time to do your research.

Some people look at tough issues, come out with their testimony intact, have a more informed faith, and carry on. Some people, like Jeremy, might look at the same issues and [4] choose a different path.

History is messy. Humans are messy. Every religion has its own batch of controversial issues to grapple with. Oftentimes those who leave our faith only find a fresh batch of tough questions in the next faith they join. For example, after Jeremy stopped believing in the Church, he became a nondenominational Christian—until he started exploring the tough questions of Christianity and the Bible. He didn’t like what he found and became an agnostic atheist.

Do I have problems with Jeremy’s methods and conclusions in the CES Letter? Absolutely, I do. I’m sure he disagrees with plenty of my methods and conclusions as well. Some people are very grateful for the Letter. For others, it’s caused an incredible amount of pain. [5] People familiar with it tend to have very strong opinions about it, and discussion surrounding the merits of the Letter can unfortunately get quite heated quite quickly. [6]

But before we end I want to pause here for a second to emphasize the following point: Just because someone leaves their faith does not make them a bad person. Just because someone leaves their faith does not mean that they just wanted to live a life of sin. There are fantastic people within our faith, and there are fantastic people who leave our faith. There are happy people within our faith, and there are happy people who leave our faith. We can share our beliefs, we can defend the faith, we can invite repentance [7] — but as followers of Jesus Christ, we *do not* have the luxury of mocking, ostracizing, or demonizing those who leave — Jeremy included. We are not under commandment to agree with them, but we are under commandment to love them, no matter what path they choose. And that’s something all of us, including myself, can do better at. Personally, I’ve found much more happiness by living my religion than I have by arguing with people about it.

Anyway, there's a quick rundown of what the CES Letter is. Feel free to shoot us a message if you've got questions or concerns, and have a great day!

## Learning More:

- The Church's Gospel Topics Essays: <https://bit.ly/3vsg9AX>
- Encyclopedia of Mormonism: <https://bit.ly/3d20zWD>
- Faith and Beliefs playlist covering Joseph Smith topics: <https://bit.ly/3wryFLi>
- Faith and Beliefs playlist covering Church history topics: <https://bit.ly/3xmqOyp>
- Faith and Beliefs playlist covering Book of Mormon topics: <https://bit.ly/3xBIWVt>
- Faith and Beliefs playlist covering gospel doctrine: <https://bit.ly/3wnfzG1>
- Joseph Smith Papers Project: <https://bit.ly/35op9Na>
- BYU Studies: <https://bit.ly/3vrgLXM>
- Read "Saints" vol. 1 here: <https://bit.ly/3cj8Myq>
- Read "Saints" vol. 2 here: <https://bit.ly/2U9cbAr>
- Example of one response to the CES Letter by a believing Latter-day Saint (the author's views and methods are his own): <https://bit.ly/3pXXGLK>

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