



Type: Book Chapter

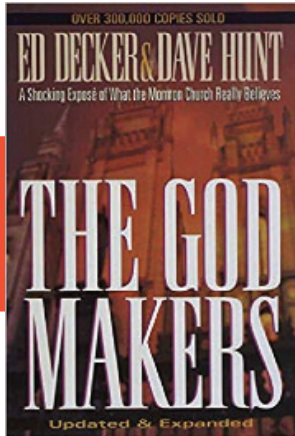
Introduction

Author(s): Jim Bennett

Source: *A CES Letter Reply: Faithful Answers For Those Who Doubt*

Published: Sandy, UT; n.p., 2018

As a freshman at the University of Southern California, I was first exposed to what is commonly referred to as “anti-Mormon literature.” I read “The Godmakers” from cover to cover, which described a church with a history and doctrines far darker and more sinister than the relatively dull one in which I had spent the entirety of my life. I also ended up listening to a “Christian” radio station which broadcast the rantings of one Walter Martin, who had made a living as an “expert” on “cults” and the “occult,” a world in which Mormons supposedly play a starring role.

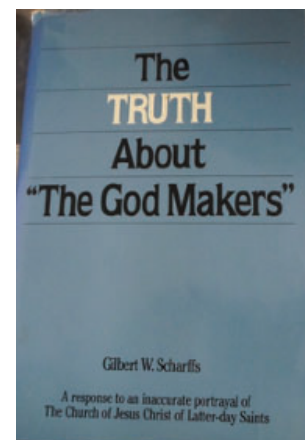


INTRODUCTION

In reviewing the work of these people who had made tearing down my faith their mission, I found myself feeling frustrated, frightened, and powerless – frustrated because I knew that a good chunk of what they were saying was flat-out wrong, frightened because I wasn't sure if the stuff they claimed that I didn't recognize was actually true, and powerless because I was in no position to offer any substantive rebuttal.

I returned home to Salt Lake over Christmas break and, out of the blue, I was given a copy of “The Truth About ‘The Godmakers,’” a book by a man named Gilbert Scharffs that took “The Godmakers” and refuted every charge in it, line by line, with ample documentation. (You can now read the whole book online – no charge.) I later met Mr. Scharffs after I returned home from my missionary service in Scotland, and I thanked him for his thoughtful reply. What struck me, beyond the saliency of his arguments, was the patient, Christlike tone with which he wrote. Where “The Godmakers” had been inflammatory and insulting, Scharffs had been reasonable and kind, with no attempt to attack or defame his supposed enemies personally.

The CES Letter is quite different in tone from “The Godmakers” and my old pal Walter, who were making the case that the Church is a Satanic cult, whereas Jeremy is making a more intellectual case that the Church is little more than a clumsy, obvious, and occasionally well-intended fraud. So while Walter Martin wanted to tear down my faith to make me a Christian, Jeremy Runnells just wants to tear down my faith and leave me comfortless in the theological rubble. It's a far bleaker worldview than the one “The Godmakers” was peddling, and it's also, I think, a far more devastating assault on faith in general.



Runnells insists that he still hasn't received a reply from the CES director to whom his magnum opus was addressed. I'm no CES Director, but I did teach early morning seminary for three years in Westwood, California, in the meetinghouse right behind the Los Angeles Temple. (I did not, however, stay in a Holiday Inn last night.)

I was actually paid to teach seminary, more or less making me a CES employee, although my “salary” was only \$599 per year. Another dollar and I would have had to declare it on my income tax. (As it was, they labeled the check as “reimbursement for expenses,” but, just to be safe, I still paid tithing on it.) This probably means I was more of a CES contractor than a CES employee, but I prefer the title as it is, even if it contains error. That way, my fallibility will not be in question.

There have been many other attempts to respond, most notably from FairMormon, which Runnells dismisses as a group of “unofficial apologists.” I take from this that only a direct response from the Quorum of the Twelve or the First Presidency would satisfy Runnells as an “official apologist” response. Certainly this response is deeply unofficial – I’m the Second Counselor in the Sunday School Presidency, which is the limited extent of my current ecclesiastical authority. So nothing I write here should be interpreted as anything but the extremely fallible opinion of a rank-and-file church member. One wonders, then, why I would bother to write it at all.

To answer that, I would cite the Gilbert Scharffs example, recognizing that he was actually a CES Director, and so his response might rise to the level of a more official response. Regardless of his credentials, I will be forever grateful to Brother Scharffs for offering solid answers to an ignorant college freshman who was looking for them when the “Godmakers” authors were eager to destroy my faith.

Nothing I write here has had any impact on the opinion of Jeremy Runnells – he seems to have made up his mind on this stuff – but if there is a single kid, or adult, who reads this and feels a little less frustrated, frightened, or powerless, then writing this will be worth it.

I’ve tried to avoid contention here. The Book of Mormon quotes Jesus as saying that “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.” (See 3 Nephi 11:29-30)

I’m sad to report that I’ve had my share of contentions on subjects like these, and I have no desire to deliberately reproduce that experience here on anywhere else. I also don’t want this to be interpreted as a personal indictment of Jeremy Runnells. He is a man I have never met and a man I am in no position to judge. I don’t think it’s helpful to demonize those who doubt, or even those who leave. I will therefore attempt to rise to a level of charity, honesty, and compassion in my response, and I will probably, at times, fail miserably, probably because I also have no intention of going easy on that bad arguments that can be found throughout the CES Letter. I hope people do not interpret hostility to bad arguments as personal hostility to the human being who made them.

In fact, I intend to keep things as light and playful as possible, as I don’t see any reason to treat this thing like a funeral. Just because we’re dealing with issues of eternal salvation, damnation, and hellish lakes of fire and brimstone, there’s no reason we can’t have a little fun.

So, some ground rules – Jeremy’s words will be reproduced here in forest green, the color of life. My responses will be in black, the color of darkness.

In addition, much of the info this response has already been on my blog in one form or another. I have freely plagiarized myself without giving myself proper attribution. (In fact, I’ve done it several times already in this foreword, and you probably didn’t even notice!) It saves me the time of rewriting what I’ve already written on a number of these subjects, and I’m nothing if not lazy.

With that inspirational background out of the way, let us begin.

[Name of CES Director Removed],

Thank you for responding to my grandfather's request to answer my concerns and questions and for offering your time with me. I appreciate it.

Well, as is probably clear by this point, I’ve never met you or your grandfather, and I’m not the CES Director who’s name you’ve had removed. (After all these years, we still don’t know who that guy is. Has he come forward? Is he in some kind of witness protection program? Is he hiding in the John Taylor bunker in the Logan Temple?)

I recognize I’m quite presumptuous of me to step into a conversation to which I was not invited, but that’s the kind of guy I am. I thank you for your kind words which I’m pretending are intended for me.

I’m interested in your thoughts and answers as I have been unable to find official answers from the Church for most of these issues. It is my hope that you’re going to have better answers than many of those given by unofficial apologists such as FairMormon and the Neal A . Maxwell Institute (formerly FARMS).

And right here, I want to stop you and challenge some questionable assumptions right at the outset. You label both FAIR and the Maxwell Institute as “unofficial apologists.” This is a charge you repeat several times on your website and in your initial letter. The designation seems appropriate for FAIR, which is an independent organization with no official connection to the Church other than the membership of its researchers, but the Maxwell Institute is funded by BYU, a Church-owned school. Doesn’t that give them any cache of officialdom?

Surely if the official church thought what the Maxwell Institute were saying were nonsense, they’d pull the plug. Are there only 15 “official apologists” whose office gives them the necessary credibility to respond to your questions? Do the Seventies count?

The basic problem here is a fallacious appeal to authority in an attempt to poison the well of anything that FAIR or FARMS may say because it lacks some kind of Church Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Their arguments, like your arguments, ought to be evaluated solely on their merits rather on the credentials of those making them. Remember, they may be unofficial apologists, but you’re an unofficial critic, too. (If you are official, I’m going to

need to see some paperwork and two forms of ID.)

I'm just going to be straightforward in sharing my concerns. Obviously, I'm a disaffected member who lost his testimony so it's no secret which side I'm on at the moment. All this information is a result of over a year of intense research and an absolute rabid obsession with Joseph Smith and Church history.

Fine by me. I've had my shots.

With this said, I'd be pretty arrogant and ignorant to say that I have all the information and that you don't have answers. Like you, I put my pants on one leg at a time and I see through a glass darkly.

Well, that's nice to know. Pants are good. But if you want to publish the CES Letter in the UK, perhaps you should say "trousers" instead.

You may have new information and/or a new perspective that I may not have heard or considered before. This is why I'm genuinely interested in what your answers and thoughts are to these issues.

I recognize I don't have any new information or/nor a new perspective, which means that you've heard a number of things you've both heard and considered before, many of which come from those unofficial, disqualified sources you previously mentioned. But by the same token, having already read ahead, nothing you've written is anything I hadn't heard or considered before. Yet somehow, the same information that drove you ought of the Church has not damaged, and in many cases has even strengthened, my own personal faith.

That shouldn't come as a surprise to either of us. In the age of the Internet, it's rather foolish to presume that the Church has any capacity to hide any aspect of its practices or history from the world at large, so it always amazes me when people who are disaffected with the Church, as they fixate on something that church does or did that they don't like, act like they've uncovered something nobody else has ever discovered.

This was the case when I had a telephone conversation with a man named Mike Norton, a guy who, by his own admission, has twelve fake temple recommends that he uses to sneak in to temples to film the endowment ceremony and post it on YouTube. He was very friendly at the outset, and he remained friendly even as he launched into a 45-minute diatribe against the church, all of which was stuff that I'd heard before and have talked about on my blog beyond the point of endurance.

Did I know all about the seedy elements of Joseph Smith's polygamy? Well, yes. What about the Kinderhook Plates? Yeah, haven't written about them, but they're no big deal. What about the lack of external evidence for the Book of Mormon? Well, I think there's quite a bit more evidence, both internal and external, than enemies of the church will admit. Didn't get a chance to say any of that, though – he tore through his spiel under the assumption that I'd never heard such things, and I just listened as he recited them as he has likely done dozens, if not hundreds, of times before.

The oddest complaint he had, the only one which I have not, in fact, heard from anyone else, was that Gordon B. Hinckley wasn't a prophet because he didn't act like Moses coming down from Sinai when he went on Larry King's CNN show. I had seen that interview, and I found him pleasant and inspiring, but maybe he should have parted some large body of water or something.



So, to sum up, nothing here is going to be particularly new to either of us. But perhaps it might be helpful to someone else.

I've decided to put down in writing just about all the major concerns that I have. I went through my notes from my past year of research and compiled them together. It doesn't make sense for me to just lay down 5 concerns while also having 20 other concerns that legitimately challenge the truth claims of the LDS Church.

And you have well exceeded 20, although you repeated yourself a number of times. One of the problems with your letter is that you often reframe an accusation against the Church as if it's a new accusation, seemingly in the hopes that the sheer volume of your complaints will bring someone's "shelf" come crashing down. How many times, for instance, do you quote a single hearsay source to discredit the Three Witnesses while ignoring 60+ more that support the claims of the Church? (Spoiler alert: Seven.)

This is also a somewhat disingenuous statement, in that your letter was largely crowdsourced via the [exMormon Forum on Reddit](#). This isn't a compilation of personal notes; it's a large-scale team effort. Perhaps you should give the "scary Internet" a little more credit.

A quick description of my background might help you understand where I'm coming from. I was a very active and fully believing member my entire life up until around the summer of 2012. My grandpa already outlined my life events to you in his email so I think you get the idea that I accepted and embraced Mormonism.

Again, I don't know your grandpa, but I take you at your word. I'll even assume you always had 100% home teaching and that you paid tithing on your gross income and not your net.

In February of 2012, I was reading the news online when I came across the following news article: [Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age 1](#). In the article was information about a Q&A meeting at Utah State University that LDS Church Historian and General Authority, Elder Marlin K. Jensen, gave in late 2011. He was asked his thoughts regarding the effects of Google on membership and people who are "leaving in droves" over Church history.

That quote from Elder Jensen has infamously made him the most quoted General Authority on anti-Mormon sites and has been the source of much mischief, especially since it's usually cited by people who claim that Elder Jensen himself made the claim that people were "leaving in droves." To cite one example, John Dehlin's website [StayLDS.org](#) links to the article with the following description of Elder Jensen's remarks:

This year, Elder Marlin Jensen, the [Mormon Church's](#) outgoing official historian, acknowledged that members are defecting from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints "in droves" and that the pace is increasing.

The problem is that Elder Jensen said no such thing. The "leaving in droves" premise came from the questioner, not Elder Jensen. Perhaps Elder Jensen should have corrected the questioner in his answer – i.e. "I don't think it's accurate to say people are 'leaving in droves,' buddy. And just how much is a 'drove,' anyway?" – but I'm betting he didn't realize that he would be attributed with the designation of droves from then to forevermore.

It's also dishonest to say, as Dehlin's site does, that Jensen claimed "the pace [of drove leavers] is increasing." He said no such thing. He's later clarified his statement by saying "To say we are experiencing some Titanic-like wave of apostasy is inaccurate." That statement would appear to contradict both the droves and the increasing pace, but it's a statement that's generally given short shrift when critics cite Jensen as proof of the Church's implosion. To your credit, you make the proper attribution of droves to the questioner and not to the General Authority, but since so many others do not, I thought this issue bears mentioning here. It's also worth reading all of Elder Jensen's answer, which, in context, described the great lengths to which the church is now going in order to provide greater access to historical information. You can read the full answer here at this [unofficial apologetic website](#).

Elder Marlin K. Jensen's response:

"Maybe since Kirtland, we've never had a period of – I'll call it apostasy, like we're having now; largely over these issues..."

This truly shocked me. I didn't understand what was going on or why people would leave "over history."

Why is "over history" in quotes? Who are you quoting?

I started doing research and reading books like LDS historian and scholar Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling 2* and many others to try to better understand what was happening.

And good for you! I adore *Rough Stone Rolling* and heartily recommend it to all readers, both LDS and not. A terrific read, thoroughly researched, and one that vastly increased my testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The following issues are among my main concerns.

All right, here we go – incoming droves of stuff on the horizon:

